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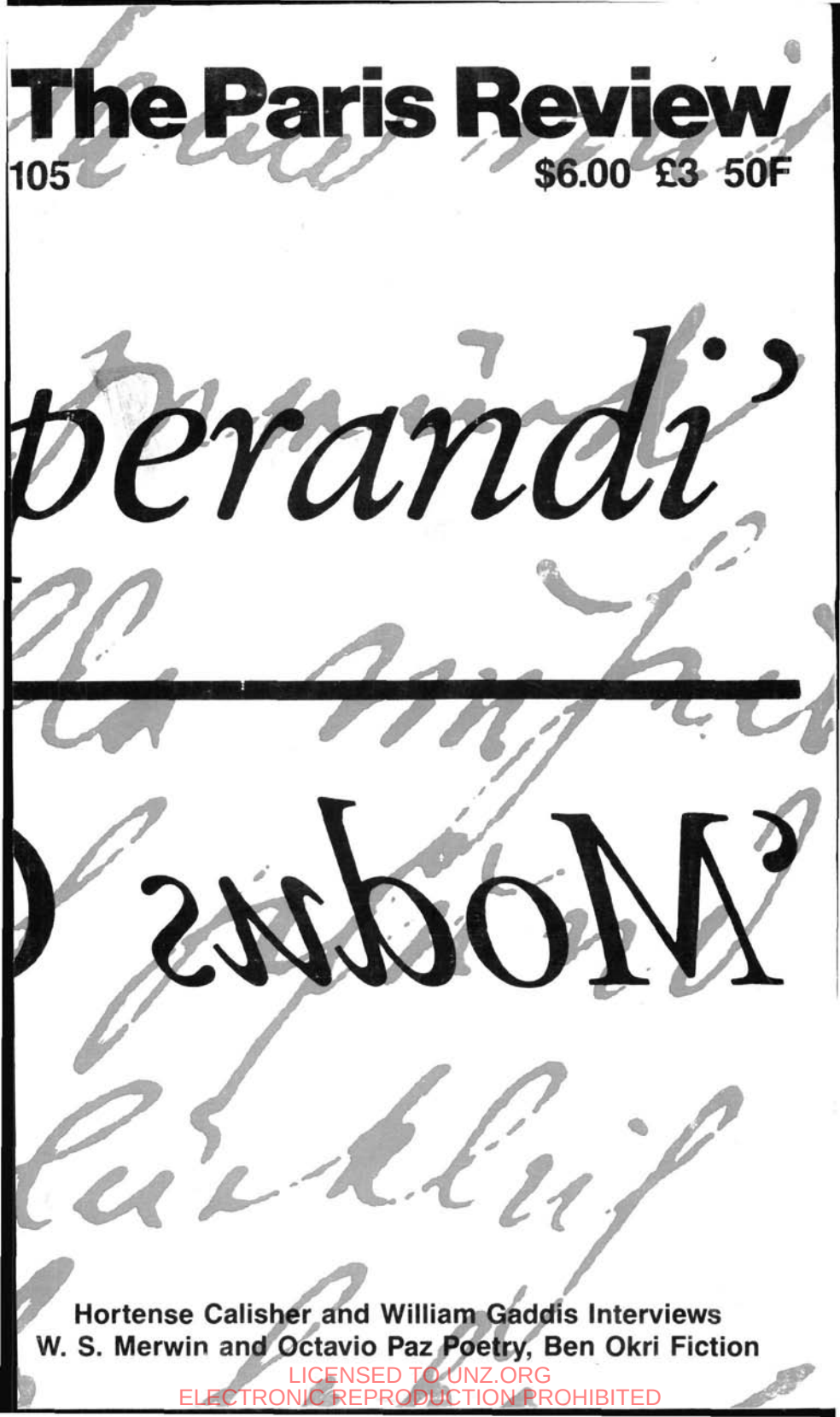

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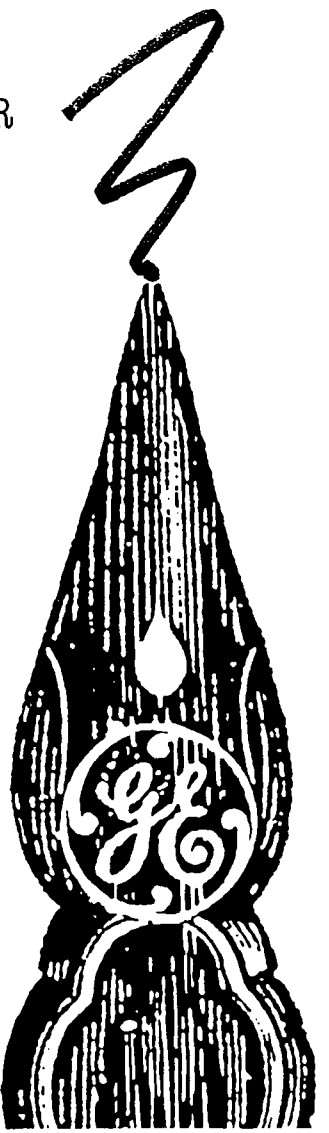

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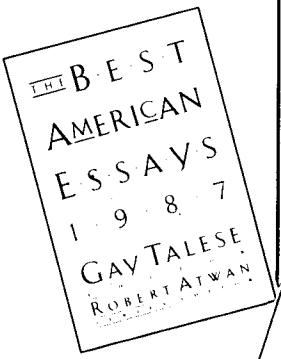

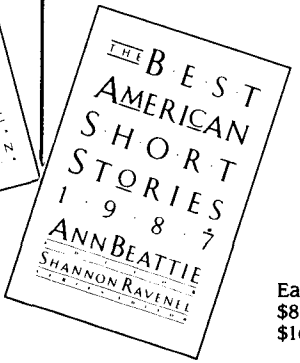

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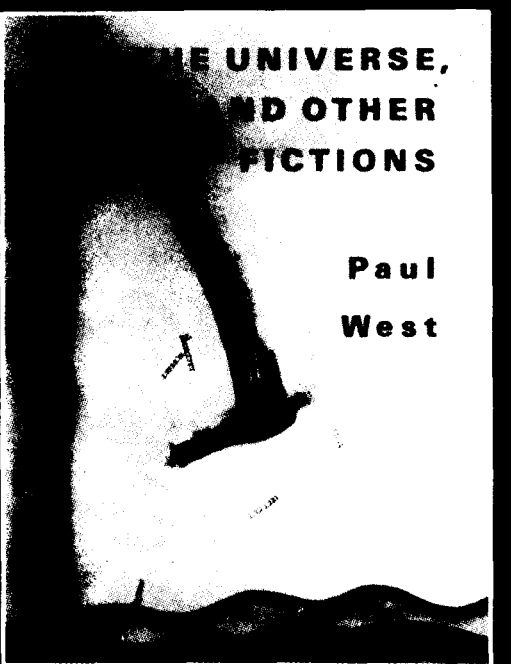

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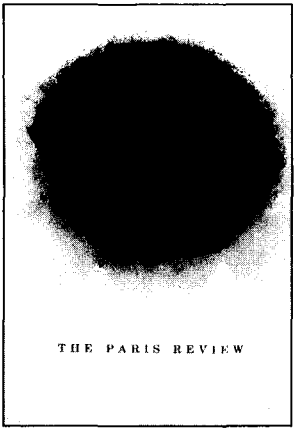

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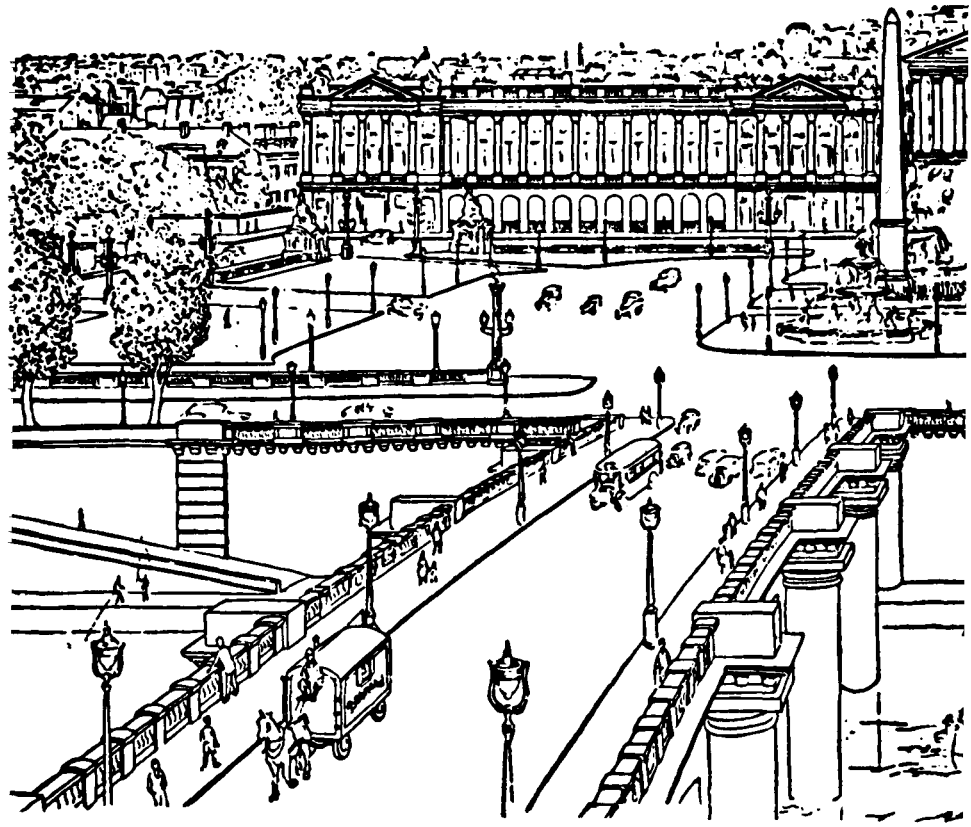

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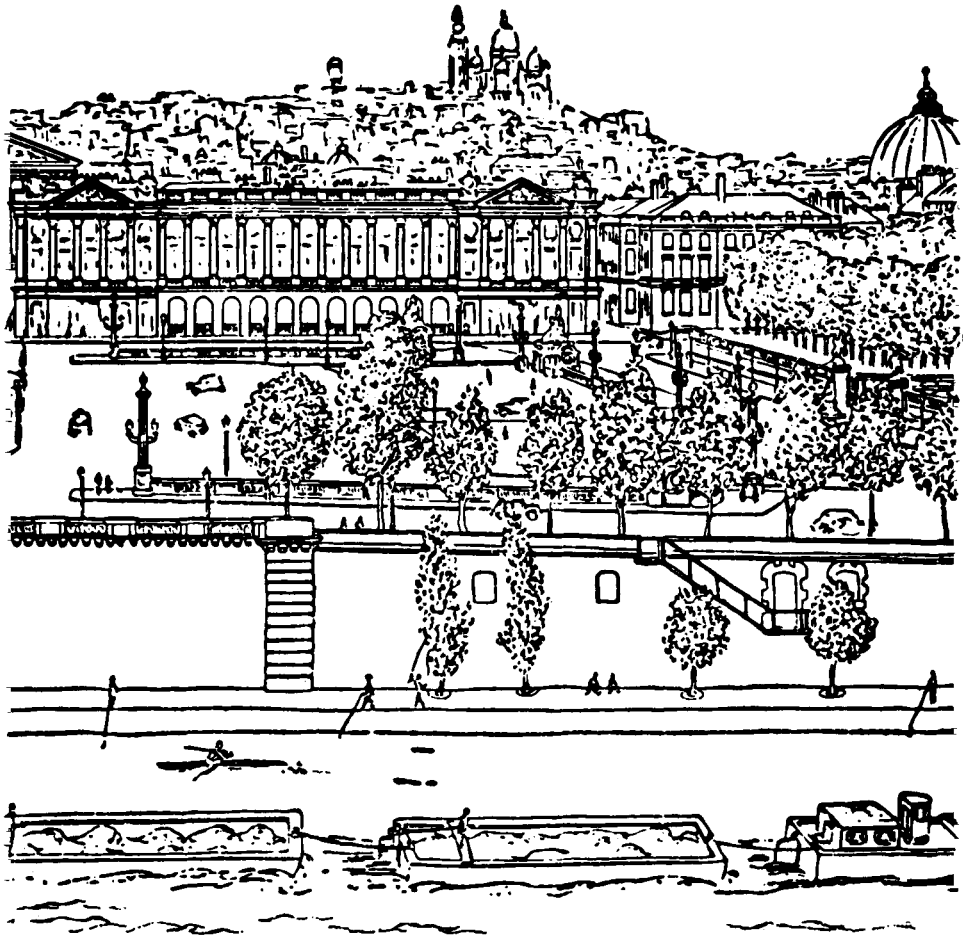

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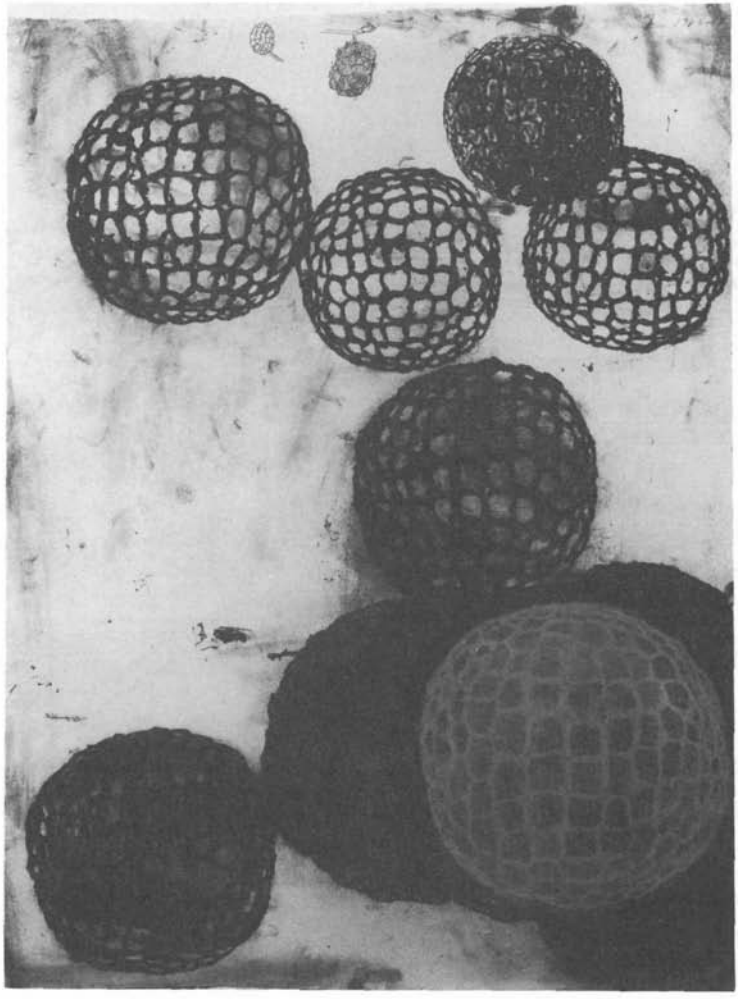

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Interviews

Hortense Calisher	*The Art of Fiction C*	156
William Gaddis	*The Art of Fiction CI*	54

Feature

Conrad Aiken, J. P. Donleavy, James Laughlin, et al.	*Portraits*	207

Fiction

Hans Koning	from *Acts of Faith*	106
Bradford Morrow	*Christmas in Fiesole*	195
Ben Okri	*The Dream-Vendor's August*	18
Paul West	*Captain Ahab: A Novel by the White Whale*	132

Art

Joseph Kosuth	*Modus Operandi*	121

Poetry

Bruce Andrews	*Could Darwin Instruct Those Turtles?*	150
Michael Burkard	*A Series of Judgements*	99
Kevin Jeffery Clarke	*Walking Papers*	94
Milo De Angelis	*Four Poems*	116
Stephen Dunn	*Among Men*	97
Wendy Wilder Larsen	*The Stove*	98
David Lehman	*Four Versions of the End*	102
Jennifer Martin	*Sunday Painting*	101
W. S. Merwin	*Three Poems*	153
Eugenio Montale	*Mediterranean*	188
Sharon Olds	*The Ferryer*	95
Octavio Paz	*Letter of Testimony Cantata*	133
Robert Pinsky	*Picture*	100
Tomaz Salamun	*Two Poems*	148
Jeffrey Skinner	*Self Portrait*	93
Bruce Smith	*In the City of Brotherly Love*	145
Jordan Smith	*Alberich*	142
Mark Turpin	*Two Poems*	90
Arthur Vogelsang	*Never Ask for Advice*	144
Adam Zagajewski	*Six Poems*	46
Cynthia Zarin	*Saturn*	104

Notes on Contributors 225

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The Dream-Vendor's August

Ben Okri

Ajegunle Joe spent the evening reading the letters from the few subscribers he had left. Without a single exception they called him a fraud and demanded back their money. When he had finished reading he was very depressed. He went to a bar and got quite drunk, but that didn't improve anything. So he went to his favourite hotel to look for a cheap prostitute. That didn't help either. He kept hearing the subscribers in his head. In the end he paid the woman for her time and left more depressed than he had arrived. He got home, lit two mosquito coils, and climbed into bed. He forgot to lock the door. Soon he was snoring.

He dreamt about a woman with a rugged face and indifferent eyes. All through the dream he didn't have an erection. When he woke up it was with the certainty that someone had been in the room while he was asleep. He saw the open door and soon found that large quantities of printing paper, his tubes of printing ink, his transistor radio, his pornographic magazines, and a book he much valued called *The Ten Wonders of Africa*, were missing.

He sat on the bed. He stared at the almanacs of long-

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bearded mystics on the wall. Somewhere in him was the feeling that a pain he had lived with had suddenly edged towards the unbearable. He had the taste of tangerines in his mouth. He was two weeks into the month of August.

When July passed with its thunderous downpours, and when August advanced with its dry winds and browning elephant grass, Joe felt himself at the mercy of a cyclical helplessness. Two years earlier, around the same time, Joe lost a woman he had been planning to marry. They had met one day to discuss their future together. Joe had catarrh. He made the mistake of blowing his nose in her presence, the act of which produced a long and disgusting sound. She didn't show her disapproval, but afterwards all talk of marriage was avoided. When later on he learnt that she had become engaged to another man, Joe was shattered. He went around in a daze. He no longer walked with his former arrogant swing. He became clumsy and unsure of himself. He lost his job. One night in a bar when he tried to sound like his former arrogant self, he got involved in a fight and had two of his front teeth knocked into his mouth. Then he took to strangling his laughter.

It was after the woman left his life, after his birthday in September, that he got another job in a small printing press. He took correspondence courses in psychology and salesmanship and earned himself two diplomas. He developed an unusual interest in the occult and in mysticism. His thoughts became too deep for him and his dreams became more mysterious. He gradually experienced himself being taken over by a new personality. He took to writing down his visions and dreams: then he began publishing them as cheap pamphlets. The first pamphlet was called *Mysteries of Orumaka*. Quite a few people bought it and he was encouraged by the modest sales. With the help of his boss he printed pamphlets like: *How to Sleep Soundly, How to Have Powerful Dreams, How to Fight Witches and Wizards,* and *How to Banish Poverty from Your Life*. The pamphlets achieved some limited popularity but they didn't make him any money. Sometimes when there wasn't much work at the printing press Ajegunle Joe would take bundles of his pamphlets to sell on the molue buses. It

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was in the Christmas of that year that it occurred to him to set up a correspondence course on how people could improve their lives. He discussed it with his boss and they agreed to split profits. Two adverts were placed in the newspapers and soon they had subscribers. The correspondence course was named: 'Turn Life Into Money.'

And then came the following August. Tax inspectors took a sudden interest in him. His mother fell ill and he had to go home and see her. When he got back the landlord had taken it into his head to increase the rent. It was an August of elections, political fevers and riggings. Ajegunle Joe's dreams became so violent that he wrote and printed a treasonable tract called: *The Farce Which Will Become History*. Nobody bought the tract and one night the printer's shop was raided by soldiers, who carried away all existing copies. The police got hold of Joe the next day, and he was jailed for two weeks without any charges being brought against him. Then, suddenly, he was released. He wrote to all the newspapers about his arrest, but because no one knew him, and everyone was afraid, his letters were never published. What made matters worse was that his boss suddenly opted out of their joint venture, deducted half the losses from Joe's salary, and then gave him the sack. But what saved Joe was that the new personality had taken him over completely. He spent the rest of the year selling his pamphlets in the day and occasionally working at the docks in the night.

This August was no better. Business had been worse than usual. Printing paper was scarce. And he felt stale. Nothing moved in him that morning. He found himself at the point where his faith in his own correspondence course had reached its lowest.

He got up from the bed and opened the window. He went to the toilet and then had a shower. Back in his room he lit a stick of incense. He fetched a tumbler of water, breathed deeply, and drank, facing the east. He sat in one of his chairs. He intoned some vowel sounds and then he meditated on an empty stomach. By the time he had finished meditating and

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sealing his morning prayers with occultic signs, he had begun to accept the reality of his losses. He made some food and ate. He was about to start cleaning his room when he heard someone calling to him from outside.

'Is Jungle Joe in? Jungle Joe! Your friend is here.'

His friend, Cata-cata, knocked and came into the room. They called him by that name because he used to be a hard-headed generator of confusion. He had quieted down now; he was even thinking of marriage. He used to be a boxer, but after being knocked out in the first round of an unmemorable featherweight match, he seemed to settle for the anonymity of being a ladies man. He was tall and solemn; he had a wide nose and narrow eyes. He wore a Ghanian print shirt and khaki trousers. He worked regular night shifts at the docks. In the day time he fished. He smiled broadly at Joe when he came into the room. He had two mangoes in his hand. He had a Ghanian woman with him. She was robust, and her body was slow in its thick sweaty sensuality. She had fleshy lips, a kind face, and she smiled a lot. She carried an orange and two bottles of small stout.

'How are you Joe?' Cata-cata said, slapping his friend on the back.

'Not too good.'

'Why, what's happened?'

'Everything.'

'Have you met my friend?' Cata-cata said to the Ghanian woman. She was still smiling.

'Well, this is Ajegunle Joe, occultist and dreamer. Joe, this is my girlfriend, Sarah.'

They greeted one another. The Ghanian woman avoided meeting Joe's eyes. They were all still standing. Cata-cata offered Joe a mango.

'No, thank you, my friend. Things are so bad I don't have a mouth for fruits,' Joe said.

'That's a shame.'

'Cata-cata, I've just been robbed.'

'When?' Cata-cata said, taking a seat and indicating to Sarah that she do the same. She sat on the bed.

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'Today. When I was asleep.'

'You mean they robbed you when you were asleep?'

'Yes,' said Joe, dryly.

'What sort of sleep is that? You must have been drinking too much.'

Cata-cata laughed in the direction of the woman.

'I think I left the door open,' said Joe unsmilingly.

'What did they take?'

'Pamphlets. Clothes. They took the transistor radio and . . .'

'That radio?' interrupted Cata-cata, laughing again in the direction of the woman.

'They must have been desperate. . .'

'And worst of all,' said Joe, 'they took that book that I got. *The Ten Wonders of Africa.*'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' said Cata-cata with laughter still on his face.

Ajegunle Joe nodded. He was feeling in bad humour. He sat on a stool and kept eyeing the woman. Looks very ripe, he thought. Then he felt bitter that for two years he had been without a regular woman.

'I can't offer you drinks,' Joe said suddenly.

'What is drinks between friends, eh? Besides, we brought our own.'

The Ghanian woman crossed her legs. Then she put the bottles of stout on the table. There was a long silence. There was some embarrassment in the air. Cata-cata kept trying to catch Joe's eyes.

'So how is the course doing?'

'Bad,' said Joe, staring grimly at his friend. Cata-cata made signs for Joe to leave the room. Joe pretended not to notice. He continued with what he was saying.

'One of my subscribers ran into trouble,' he said in an even voice.

'How?'

'She followed my instructions and got sacked. She wants her money back.'

'What instructions?' Cata-cata said, gesticulating furiously.

'In the first lesson I instructed them to look fearlessly at peo-

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ple in the eye and to speak up forcefully. Well, her boss didn't like it when she did.'

Cata-cata laughed again. The Ghanian woman laughed as well. She looked very youthful when she laughed and her breasts rocked. Joe remained dour.

When the general laughter had subsided Cata-cata said, with more intentionality than was needed: 'Joe, aren't you going out? It's going to rain soon, you know.'

'It's not supposed to rain in August.'

'But it's going to rain, anyway,' Cata-cata said, glaring at Joe.

'So why should I go out if it's going to rain soon, eh?'

He knew Cata-cata was referring to their usual arrangement. I've been robbed, Joe thought, and all my friend can think about is sex.

'Because you can go out and come back before it rains, that's why.'

'I see,' said Joe.

Cata-cata, surprised at his friend's incomprehension, looked from Joe to the woman and back again.

'You know what I mean,' he said, with some desperation.

'I don't know,' Joe replied, sweating in pretended ignorance. 'How can I know when I've been robbed, eh? And all the subscribers want their money back. I don't know anything, my friend.'

Joe was very serious. Look at all that is happening to me, he thought, and all he wants to do is make love to this woman in my room.

'By the way,' Joe said aloud, 'what is wrong with your room, eh?'

Cata-cata was alarmed. He stammered. He had a regular girlfriend; she had a key to his room; and she made it a habit to turn up at the oddest hours. There was even talk of marriage between them. He wanted the Ghanian woman quickly, on the side. He couldn't risk the use of his own room, and Joe knew this well.

'I have a relative staying,' Cata-cata said, almost pleadingly.

Ajegunle Joe stared at him unsympathetically. Cata-cata suddenly stood up.

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'I want to talk to you outside,' he said to Joe.

They both went out.

'You're a bastard!' Cata-cata said, the moment they were outside.

'Things are hard,' Joe said.

'What are you trying to do? Spoil my fun, eh?'

'Things are bad.'

'So what? Aren't we friends? Look. Relax. We'll go fishing later.'

'What will that do for me?'

'You might catch a fish. You've never caught a fish.'

'A fish won't pay my rent. A fish won't get those thieves.'

'You are mad.'

'All of us are mad.'

'Rubbish.'

They were silent for a moment. They could see the back of the Ghanian woman through the window. She fidgeted. She played with the orange.

'You know she likes you.'

'Who?'

'Sarah. I've done a build up of you. I can tell she likes you. Have her afterwards. She won't mind.'

'How do you know?'

'What do you mean? She is a good, fun-loving woman.'

'I don't want her afterwards,' Joe said, looking at her through the window.

'What do you want then, eh?'

'Money.'

'Money?'

'Lend me some money.'

'More? You owe me ten already.'

'Give me another ten.'

'I am not a bank.'

'Give me ten. I'll sell some pamphlets today. I'll pay you back when some subscriptions come in.'

'And when will that be?'

'Today, tomorrow, soon.'

'You've been saying that for two years now.'

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'Lend me ten.'

'Okay.'

'Things are hard.'

'Things are always hard for you.'

They'll get better.'

'When do you want it?'

'Now.'

'Now?'

'Yes.'

Cata-cata gave Joe the ten naira. They went back in without exchanging another word.

The Ghanian woman had started peeling the orange with her fingers when they both came in. Cata-cata sat down on the bed next to her. He put his arm round her.

Joe said, 'I'm going to check my post office box before it rains. Do you want some stamps?'

'No.'

Ajegunle Joe looked at the woman as she ate the orange. With her palm she wiped the juice that flowed down the sides of her mouth.

Struck by the fleshiness of her thighs, noticing the succulence of her lips, Joe said: 'Have you read any of my pamphlets?'

'No,' said the woman.

'You should. There are many powers in this world.'

'Leave her alone,' Cata-cata said, caressing her neck.

'They call me the Dream-Vendor,' Joe said, 'because I am at the mercy of my dreams. I am the man who runs the Cosmic Power Correspondence Course. Have you ever heard of it?'

'Leave her alone,' Cata-cata said. 'She can't read and she doesn't have any money to subscribe. Leave the poor girl alone.'

'Yes, I have,' the woman said.

Both men turned towards her.

'My younger brother is taking your course. He thinks it's all right. Every morning he looks into the mirror and says strange things. He drinks a glass of water, breathes deeply and starts making funny noises. He is always asking me the direction of

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the east. He is going to university in Ghana next year. He always smells of bad incense.'

Ajegunle Joe was surprised. He beamed. He held up his head. He was so amazed that he didn't say anthing. His throat kept moving. His mood immediately improved and he wore his battered galoshes and the greatcoat he had bought cheaply from amongst the stolen goods at the docks. He bustled around the room. He moved with a forced swing that tossed the bulk of the coat one way and another. The swagger suited him fine.

He said: 'People need advice. People need power. To see far is the only way to win the battles of this terrible life.'

The Ghanian woman said: 'My brother takes several other courses. About five of them. Every night he does a different thing. Sometimes he mixes up all the instructions. He is too serious. I think he is going mad.'

She had finished eating the orange. Her eyes shone brilliantly. She stopped smiling.

Ajegunle Joe didn't seem to have heard what she said, because he went on to deck himself out with his talismanic necklaces. He made a show of wearing his three rings. He explained their powers as he wore them. One of them was called 'The Ring of Merlin.' It was supposed to have been brought to Africa by Portuguese sailors. It had the magic number 7 in green; it was guaranteed to make him invisible in time of danger. Then there was 'The Ring of Master Eckhart.' He was a German mystic. This ring, Joe said, had been additionally treated by a Spanish divine. The third one, with its red triangle, was 'The Ring of Aladdin.' It had been found on the dead body of Isaac Newton.

'For every act there is an equal and opposite reaction,' Joe said. He winked at his friend. He bared the gap in his front teeth in a smile to the woman.

He said: 'Nothing stays still. Do it gently, but think of my poor bed.'

He swung the back of his coat and made for the door. Soon he had the sky opening above him.

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He paused just outside his room. He stood still, listening. He heard the bed creak.

He heard Cata-cata say: '*What are you waiting for?*'

Then the window was slammed shut.

Joe went up the street, towards the main road. The air was dense and unpleasant with the smell of the evaporating gutters. It was August and the bushes near uncompleted houses were thickly filmed with dust, and no trees were in bloom.

The main road was cluttered with multiple traffic jams. Drivers sweated at the steering wheels: they looked as if they were undergoing the most perverse of punishments. Joe felt a peculiar freedom walking past the vehicles in the standstill, so he began to stride. In the second lesson of his correspondence course, Joe says: 'The way you carry yourself is the way you want people to think of you.' When Joe cuts down the road he looks like an amiable scarecrow. He walks too stylishly. People sometimes say that too much style betrays hunger.

There was chaos at the post office. Queues stretched out from the building and down the road. Joe checked his box: there weren't any subscriptions, but there were enquiries about his catalogue. He joined the end of the queue and it was a while before he got anywhere near the counter. He heard someone in the queue saying that the post office workers were so underpaid that they were now sabotaging the post. When he got to the counter it took some time, and some shouting, before any of the clerks paid him any attention.

The clerk said: 'Why are you shouting as if you are in your mother's kitchen?'

'God punish you for saying that,' Joe said.

An argument ensued and Joe got so worked up he felt his heart hammering unnaturally against his ribs. He quieted down. The clerk went on abusing him. Joe suffered the abuses in silence. He bought his stamps. He was counting his change when he suddenly felt a searing sensation in his crotch. He pushed his way out through the crowd; but the crowd pushed back on him. He found himself being squashed to the metal-

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lic frame of the door and he was overcome with panic. He started shouting, swearing, fighting his way out.

He was on his way back home when the sky came closer to the ground. Petty traders and stall-owners rushed to clear their goods. Joe continued to stride on stylishly. There was commotion everywhere. Thunder exploded overhead. The road was lit in a moment's incandescence. The sky darkened and lightning split the air. The rain pelted down in a hurry. Gutters began to overflow and vehicles, avoiding the potholes, splashed mud all over Ajegunle Joe's greatcoat. He was soon thoroughly drenched and he had to run all the way home with water squelching in his galoshes.

Cata-cata and the woman had gone when Joe got back. Water ran down his back, along his spine. He shivered. He found the key under the doormat.

It was hot in the room. Joe undressed, dried himself, and wore fresh clothes all through the sex smells of the heated room. He couldn't open the window; the rain would come in. So he lit a stick of incense.

Cata-cata and the Ghanian woman had left the orange peelings and the mango seeds on the centre table. The two bottles of stout were empty. The bed was very rough. Flies had come into the room. Joe became very despondent. He changed the sheets and climbed into bed. He slept through the steady drone of the falling rain. He dreamt that the rain had been falling for a long time and the great voice of thunder spoke intermittently from the sky. People were wailing and there was a beautiful music pervading the world. He felt he knew the music, though he had never heard it before.

And then a midget with a large head and red eyes came to him and said: 'How are you?'

'Fine,' Joe said.

'Good.'

'How long has it been raining?' Joe asked the midget.

'Forty days.'

Joe stared at the midget. The music stopped, the rain increased.

The midget said: 'Open your eyes.'

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'They are open,' Joe said.

'No they're not. Open them.'

Joe opened his eyes and woke up. The rain was heavier and water had been flowing into his room from beneath the door. Joe stayed in bed. He turned over and listened to his stomach rumbling. He fell back asleep and the midget came to him again.

'I told you your eyes were shut,' the midget said.

'You did.'

'How can you see me if they are shut?'

'Faith,' said Joe.

The midget laughed.

'I like you,' the midget said.

'I don't know you,' Joe said, 'but I like you too.'

'You talk in riddles.'

'I'm sorry,' said Joe.

'I hate people who are sorry,' the midget said.

'But you just said you liked me.'

'I do. That's why I'm going to give you something. But when I come and ask for it, you must give it back.'

'That's fine,' said Joe.

The midget put something in Joe's palm and closed the fingers over it. Joe opened his hand and a blue light flashed in his eyes, but Joe didn't see anything.

'You didn't give me anything,' Joe said.

'Yes I did. But it's flown away now. I didn't ask you to look at it, did I?'

'What was it?' Joe asked.

'Wisdom.'

Joe was quiet for a moment.

'Why don't you give me something else then?'

The midget gave him something and told him to put it away. Joe put it in his pocket. The midget grinned and then disappeared.

When Joe woke up it had stopped raining. He spent some of the evening looking at his finances, which were very low. Then he tried to do some more work on the fifteenth lesson of his correspondence course. He had been writing on the

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theme of adversity and he couldn't find anything more to say on the subject. All he had written was: 'Adversity is the secret way to the centre, to the base and springboard. Train your muscles before you leap. Train your head before you soar.' The pile of manuscript lay beside him on the bed. He tried to think about adversity, but he succeeded only in thinking about women. He thought about sex, without getting hot. He soon fell back asleep.

Ajegunle Joe spent the morning sweeping the water out from his room. Centipedes and worms had come in with the water. He caught the worms, to use sometime for fishing, and put them in a bottle. In the afternoon he took large quantities of his pamphlets and went out. At the main road bus conductors shouted their destination and there was commotion as people rushed to embark. Joe was astonished to find that a bus stop had materialized at the top of his street. With the bus stop had also come Ogogoro retailers, corn-roasters, petty traders, prostitutes, pickpockets. Ajegunle Joe bought himself a tumbler of Ogogoro and drank it slowly. He surveyed the bickering crowd, unable to believe his luck. When he finished the Ogogoro he began selling his pamphlets. In three hours he made thirty naira, selling off the pamphlets he brought with him. He went home and fetched some more; but by the time he got back most of the crowd had gone.

In the evening Joe went to a bar near his place for a quiet celebratory drink. He had been drinking heavily for a while, turning words and phrases on adversity in his head, when he noticed a woman sitting alone at a corner table. She looked familiar. Her face was bruised and puffed under the eyes. She had a plaster on her forehead, bandages on her left arm, and a wound just above her left ankle. She wore a black dress and white high-heeled shoes. Every time Joe dropped his tumbler and looked in her direction he was convinced she had just looked away. This went on till Joe eventually caught her eye. It was the Ghanian woman. She stared at him totally without recognition. He ordered two small bottles of stout, picked up his drink, and went over to join her.

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'What happened to you?'

'None of ya business.'

'Aren't you Sarah, Cata-cata's woman?'

'Don't talk to me.'

'Don't you remember me?'

'Eh, so what?'

'What have I done to you, eh?'

'Birds of a feather . . .'

'What feather?'

'. . . shit together.'

'Hah! Sarah! What is this, eh?'

She stared stubbornly through him. He got up and opened one of the bottles of stout at the counter. When he got back she was smiling. She looked almost ghoulish with her puffed eyes, and her deranged, upturned lips.

'So how are you?' Joe asked.

'Shut up and pour me some of the stout,' she said.

'Sarah! Take it easy.'

'You men are like paper.'

He poured out her drink. She finished the tumbler of stout in a single gulp. She took out a cigarette and lit it. She stared at him.

'Talk to me,' she said, with glinting eyes.

Joe couldn't think of anything to say. After she had finished the two bottles of stout Joe went and got her three more.

'I can't finish three,' she said.

Joe stared at the ring she had on her middle finger. It was a large red ring with the white face of a little tiger.

'What sort of ring is that, eh?'

'Protection,' she said.

'What sort of protection?'

'From stupid men like ya friend,' she said.

'Sarah, tell me what happened. Did you quarrel?'

She played with her ring. She drank down another bottle, wiped her mouth, and then she went to the toilet. When she came back she told him what had happened. After she and Cata-cata had finished in Joe's room they went to the bus stop.

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Cata-cata was seeing her off home when suddenly a woman stepped out from the crowd and blocked their path. The woman turned out to be Cata-cata's regular girlfriend.

'You should have seen her. She was just like a witch,' Sarah said.

'And what happened?'

'What do you think happened? She started shouting. Cursing. Screaming. And you should have seen Cata-cata. He's big for nothing. He was begging her. Begging her. In public. And then he began to lie about me to my own very face. He said I was just a friend. And then he said I was your new girlfriend. He denied me to my own face.'

'Then what happened?'

'His girlfriend scratched his face and spat in his eyes. The next thing was that both of them were fighting. In public. She picked up a stick and knocked him on the head. He slapped her. You should have heard her scream. Just like a witch. Quickly she ran and picked up a stone. He grabbed her and slapped her again. She dropped the stone and threw sand in his eyes. He went mad. He started hitting everywhere and he slapped me and then I too joined the fight. I joined her. Both of us jumped on him and he beat us and then a soldier came with a whip and flogged us and we ran. That friend of yours is a coward. He and his woman went home and settled their quarrel.'

Joe stared at her incredulously. He went and bought two bottles of beer for himself. He drank while staring at her. She didn't seem to notice his gaze.

'Cata-cata is my best friend, but I'm not like that. Big people don't need courage. I protect my friends.'

'Shit,' she said.

'I can help you,' he said solemnly.

'Help yourself.'

They fell silent.

Then Sarah said: 'Why do you men like thin girls with big breasts, eh?'

Joe thought for a long time before he said: 'I like girls like you.'

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She stared at him from reddened eyes. She stood up.
'Where are you going now?'
She picked up the two remaining bottles of stout.
Then she said: 'Men are always asking stupid questions.'
They went out together.

He had hardly shut the window and locked the door when he felt her kissing his neck. He felt the full softness of her wet lips. He felt hot, but he didn't feel right. He felt very hot, a great yearning ached in him, he began to tremble. She kissed his face over and he noticed that she had a freckled tongue. He reached down under her pants and he was blasted by the surprising texture of her pubic hair. She was richly wet. He took off her clothes and saw that she had beads round her waist. He spent a long time kissing her breasts and playing with the circlets of hair round her nipples. Her breasts quivered. He took off his magic rings and his clothes and they went to bed. She was hot and her eyes were heavy-lidded. She still had her strange ring on. She struck him as one of those fortunate women who feel deeply their own arousal and whom it takes little touches to satisfy. He didn't like the women who were remote from their own desires, whom he would make love to from sunrise to sundown with them still seeking their elusive climaxes.

He fingered her and kissed her. He went up her, but it wasn't right. He couldn't understand. She was wet and willing, half-sunken in euphoria, waiting, it seemed, for a mere full penetration, but he wasn't hard. So he tried. He tried to dissolve himself into her desire, to feel the spell-breaking reality of her nakedness. He breathed in her potent, shameless body smells. And she waited. And he tried.

Then eventually he said: 'I think something is wrong.'
'What?'
'I don't know.'
'You don't want to do it?'
'I want to do it wickedly, but . . . it's not hard.'
She played with his private part desultorily, impatiently, wrenching it to both sides, dragging it down, talking gruffly

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to it, but still nothing came of her efforts. Suddenly she got out of bed. She dressed furiously.

'You and ya friend are completely useless,' she said.

Ajegunle Joe started to apologize, to suggest alternatives, but she slapped him hard on the face. Before he could recover she had gone out into the August night, leaving behind her two unopened bottles of stout.

Ajegunle Joe stared at the door. He sat on the bed. Then he got dressed. He wore his red, long-billed cap. He went out and bought himself a large tumbler of Ogogoro. He spent the evening staring at the almanacs of the long-bearded mystics, without seeing them. He fell asleep with the red cap still on his head.

Joe spent the next two days in misery. He went to a petty chemist and bought an ointment for gonorrhea and tablets for 'increased virility.' They were expensive. They did not solve his problem. And his problem did not help the sales of his pamphlets. On the third day when he got up to do his improvised sales talk on the molue buses, his mouth was dry, his voice was thin and unconvincing, and people laughed at him. He also found, to his chagrin, that he had serious competitors. Some of them sold pamphlets foretelling the future, complete guides to palm-reading, even pamphlets that professed herbal cures for everything from leprosy to rheumatism. Humiliated, carried away by the intensity of competition, Joe began to denounce the regime, the society, policemen, soldiers. He made predictions of violent riots in the north, and tribal cannibalism in the south. It was unfortunate for him, however, that there were two policemen in mufti on the bus. But it was fortunate for him that he was only thrown off; he would otherwise most certainly have spent the rest of August in prison. Joe was not particularly bothered by the manhandling. The policemen were northerners; besides, he always believed that when people didn't like a dream he offered, it was usually because the dream was true.

After Joe had been thrown off the molue bus he headed homewards. He was wearing his red, long-billed cap, a jacket

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too large at the shoulders, his three talismanic rings, a shabby pair of blue trousers, and his galoshes. He was an unhappy sight. He went past a mechanic's workshop and an herbalist's signboard. Next to the board there was a red-painted shed. The door of the shed opened slowly as Ajegunle Joe went past. Then a chicken with a red cloth tied to its foot came out, and then went back into the shed. Joe should have remembered the fourteenth lesson of his own correspondence course, which says: 'Every human being has got something to be afraid of, in the form of signs.' But Joe didn't remember. Without thinking, he sneaked into the shed.

It was dark inside. He smelt animal blood, stale palm wine, and excellent cooking. When his eyes got used to the darkness he saw shelves on which were candles, bones, bundles of spiders' webs, jars, bottles, snakeskins. Something brushed against his galoshes and he screamed, jumping backwards. It was a turtle. Then he saw the numerous snails on the walls. A lizard regarded him from a niche.

'Is anybody in?'

He heard a cough. Then he noticed the other room in the shed, partitioned by an antelope screen. Someone was in the room, in the half-light, eating. Joe smelt smoked shrimps, fried plantain, bush meat, and he salivated.

'Who is there?' he said.

The chicken went out of the room, past the partition. A door opened. He heard water being poured into a glass.

The lights came on suddenly and then a voice said: 'The minute I saw your red cap I knew you were mine! Come in. Sit down. My name is Aringo. I am the most underrated herbalist in this God-forsaken city.'

Joe went into the inner room.

'So. Yes. What do you want? You have family problems? A strange illness? Is someone stealing your job from you? You have woman problems? Sit down! If you have money, I can cure anything.'

Joe sat on a stool. The herbalist stared at him expectantly. He had a bony, rugged face, and blazing eyes. He sweated gloriously. He wore a red soutane and he had beads around

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his neck. He had a long tongue which kept showing when he spoke.

'Talk! Talk! What's your problem? Have you come just to look at me? That costs money, you know,' the herbalist said, baring his yellow teeth.

Joe was stuck for words.

The herbalist, increasing the volume of his voice, said: 'Look, mister man, I don't have time to stare at you. Can't you speak, eh? Have you got mosquitoes in your brain, eh?'

Joe still couldn't find anything to say. He stammered beneath his breath.

'Did someone beat you up, eh? I can give you medicine for fighting. You will be able to fight three men for seven days non-stop and you won't even be tired. You won't even sweat. That medicine costs ten naira, but it's guaranteed.'

Joe's continued silence began to exasperate the herbalist, who stood up suddenly. He strode up and down the inner room with the quick, angular movements of a cricket. That was when Joe noticed the figure of a warrior juju in a dark corner of the room. It was covered in candle wax, bits of kola nuts, native chalk, feathers of birds. It glistened with libations.

It looked very menacing, very attentive, standing there in the dark.

The herbalist said: 'Get up. Come and see this.'

The herbalist took the cover off a clay pot. Joe got up and went over. Something large and red pumped at the bottom of the pot.

'This is a crocodile's heart. Come and look at this.'

He showed Joe an earthenware pot: there was a snake curled up in its transparent liquid.

'Now. Tell me your problem and I will help you.'

It took some time before Joe managed to say, in a whisper: 'It's woman problem.'

'Ah-*hah*! So it's *woman problem*, eh?'

'Yes.'

'What kind of woman problem? You don't have a woman, or is there one in particular. . .'

'I tried to do it but I couldn't do it,' Joe said, hurriedly.

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'What couldn't you do? Tell me. Don't be afraid.'

'It wouldn't stand up.'

'You mean you had a woman there, naked, and it wouldn't stand up?'

'Yes,' Joe said in a whisper.

'I didn't hear you.'

'Yes.'

'You should have said so. It's a small problem. Is that all you were whispering to me? Is that what you are ashamed of, eh?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think you are the first person to suffer it?'

'No.'

'The English people have a name for it. They call it *impotence*.'

'I know.'

'So you know? I see.'

He gave Joe a severe look.

'Take down your trousers,' the herbalist suddenly commanded.

'*What*?'

'I said take down your trousers. Let me see what's wrong with you.'

'But . . .'

'But what? What's wrong with you, eh? You think you are special, eh? This month alone I have circumcised two white men. I have treated three Lebanese men for gonorrhea. Not to mention the Portuguese women. So you think you are special, eh? Okay. Go! Leave my shed! Get out and carry your *impotence* with you!'

Joe coyly lowered his trousers and his underpants. The herbalist inspected him.

'Is it this tiny thing you're ashamed of, eh?'

Joe was silent. The herbalist continued with his inspection and then said: 'You are lucky. You don't have gonorrhea.'

He straightened. Joe pulled up his trousers. He looked defeated.

The herbalist said: 'How much have you got?'

Joe stammered. The herbalist did not press the point.

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He said: 'In this my shed I have everything you need. I can give you the sexual power of a horse, or of a hippopotamus. They cost differently, of course. Talk to me. What do you want to fuck like? A tiger? A lion? You want to do it like a cat, or quickly like a dog? I have different things for women, too. If you both want to be powerful in bed, all it takes is money.'

'If I want to do it like a bull, how much will that cost?' Joe risked asking.

The herbalist eyed him disdainfully.

He said: 'You won't be able to afford that one. I sold that medicine to a Portuguese man last month. He came back three times for more. So. Which one do you want?'

There was another silence.

'Will the medicine work immediately?'

'Yes. Guaranteed.'

Another silence.

Then the herbalist suddenly, sharply, said: 'Take off those rings! Take them off!'

Joe started.

'Take them off! *Now*! Unless you have come here to *challenge* me.'

Joe still didn't understand what was happening. The herbalist bent over and pulled off his red soutane. His chest and stomach were covered in weird scarifications. He had a bulbous navel.

'If you want my treatment, take off those rings,' the herbalsist said, reaching for a cutlass, which he waved menacingly in the air.

Joe took off the rings and put them in his coat pocket. The herbalist still waved the cutlass as if he might use it.

He said: 'They are useless rings. Quack rings. I have got better ones. I have got one that shows you if you are healthy and it flashes before there is danger. I have got a ring that will make any woman you want come to you. I have got another one that you wear only when you are discussing a lot of money. That one costs a lot. I have even got one of King Solomon's rings. I won't sell it. So. Which one do you want, eh?'

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'I'll have the medicine of an antelope,' Joe said eventually.

The herbalist was relieved.

'It costs thirty naira. Not a kobo more, not a kobo less.'

Joe had only thirty-five naira on him.

'Okay,' he said, weakly.

His course of treatment consisted of having to wash in murky herbal water, rubbing the afflicted part with a dark, grainy ointment, and drinking a tasteless pot of soup in which had been supposedly sprinkled the grindings of an antelope's testicles. Then a fire was built in the backyard which he had to extinguish with his urine. When he finished the course of treatment nothing happened. Joe gave it some time and then he got angry and demanded his money back; but people were knocking on the outside door.

The herbalist, having already lost interest in him, said: 'Be patient. Go home and be patient. I've got other customers at the door.'

'You are a crook. You are a thief,' Joe shouted.

The herbalist's face darkened, his nose flared; but he went to a niche, came back, and gave Joe his business card.

'Go home. If by Saturday nothing happens, come and burn down my shed.'

Joe took the card and stamped out of the shed. He felt nauseous, cheated, and foolish.

Joe caught a bus home.

He got a seat at the back, near the window. The traffic moved slowly. The road and pavement were full of trinket sellers, hawkers of smoked fish, petty traders of bread and boiled eggs. Without being aware of it, Joe had been watching a girl who sold oranges. Now and again the girl broke out and sang: 'Sweet orange re-o!' She had a clear, beautiful voice.

It wasn't long before Joe became aware that he had been staring at her. She had browned teeth. Her face was pale with dried sweat. She had on a single wrapper and a loose blouse. She caught his eye and came over to sell him some oranges. He didn't know how to refuse, so he bought two. When the

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girl went back to singing of her sweet oranges Joe felt something in him. The traffic eased. Joe smiled. Beneath his coat, he felt the quiet salute of desire.

He was tremulous with desperation when he got off the bus. He went to the bar in search of Sarah. She wasn't there. He ordered a few bottles of beer and he waited. The longer he waited the more unbearable his desire became. He suffered such an unabated hardness that he was forced to go home and change into his mud-splattered greatcoat. He went from one bar to another, hoping to find Sarah. He didn't find her. All night he was hard and it began to hurt in its hardness. He couldn't meditate, couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned, worried that the herbalist had given him an unusually strong dose of the antelope medicine. In the morning he was still hard. It was in the evening that he began to approach normality. And by then it had become clear that the only way he could find the Ghanian woman was through his friend, Cata-cata.

He chose an unfortunate time to pay a visit. When he knocked on the door and went in, he saw his friend's room in disarray. Clothes were scattered all over the bed. On the cupboard there was a boxing glove that had been cut up grotesquely. There were torn photographs on the table. Cata-cata sat on a chair exhaling cigarette smoke like an enraged bull. He had scratches on his neck, and a cut on his forehead.

'What happened to you, my friend?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'Woman problem, as usual.'

Joe laughed.

'What's so funny?'

'Nothing.'

They were silent, till Joe said: 'Did they beat you up again?'

'Who?'

'The women.'

'What women?'

'Nothing.'

'What women?'

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'Forget it.'

Joe went and sat on the bed.

'Have you seen Sarah?'

'Why?'

'I want to talk to her.'

'Why?'

'Why not?'

'She's my woman.'

'What about the one you've got?'

'None of your business.'

'I want to talk to her.'

'About what?'

'About her brother, the one taking my course.'

'Leave her alone.'

'You're selfish.'

'Go and find your own woman, my friend.'

They were silent. Then Cata-cata put out his cigarette. He laughed.

'You should have seen those two big women fighting. They went at one another like hungry tigers. Fought and scratched. I hate women fighting, so I reconciled them. You know what I did afterwards, eh?'

'What?'

'I brought them home. And enjoyed both of them. Together.'

'Lie!' said Joe.

'True. I swear.'

'Lie!'

'How do you know it's a lie, eh? Were you there?'

'The Ghanian woman told me. . . '

'What . . .'

Cata-cata leapt up from the chair and rushed at Joe. He grabbed his friend by the collar of the greatcoat and shook him, wrenched him up, and threw him against the wall. Cata-cata went at him again, grabbed him round the neck, and pulled back his left fist. His eyes were deranged with jealousy. Then he suddenly relaxed. He lowered his fist. He went and

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sat down on the chair. He lit another cigarette. Neither of them spoke for a while. Joe stayed where he was with his back against the wall.

'I'm sorry, my friend.'

Joe was silent.

'Don't be angry. Me and my woman quarrelled before you arrived.'

Joe didn't move.

'So you are angry with me? Can't you forgive and forget? Okay. I will tell you where you can find her.'

Cata-cata told him; Joe still didn't speak. Cata-cata went out and bought three placatory bottles of beer: Joe continued with the sulky silence.

It was only when Cata-cata asked Joe to forget the money he owed, that Joe said: 'You don't know, and I won't tell you.'

He went to the door.

'Let's go fishing,' Cata-cata said.

'Tomorrow,' Joe said, shutting the door behind him.

They set out early in the morning on Saturday. Joe had cleaned out his room and sprinkled Dettol on the floor and over the walls. He had also been to the post office. He found four subscriptions to his course, paid for in postal orders. They set out with their fishing rods and tackles, their box of fish hooks, their jar of earthworms and insects. Cata-cata had brought some tangerines and oranges along with the three conciliatory bottles of beer. Not one word passed between them.

They caught two buses to get to FESTAC Estate along the Badagry road. Cata-cata had taken Joe fishing there before. The last time the short pier had been full of rubbish. When they arrived it was surprising for them to find the pier clean: it had been washed by the August rain.

It was a clear and hot day. The river water was brown and there were canoes in the distance. Crabs scuttled around the pier.

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Joe lay flat on his back and watched the clear sky while Cata-cata fished.

'The fishes are asleep.'

'Maybe,' Joe said.

'Did I tell you about the dream I had last night, eh?'

'No.'

'I dreamt that I caught a fish, an electric fish, a big one. I clobbered it, but it wouldn't die. I threw a brick on its head, and do you know what happened, eh?'

'No.'

'The brick scattered into pieces. And the fish was crying. It wouldn't stop crying. In the end I threw the fish back into the river.'

'It's a good thing you did,' Joe said.

'I think so.'

'Do you want a beer?'

'No, but help yourself.'

Joe took a bottle. The beer was still chilled. He opened the bottle with his teeth and drank steadily through half of it. He burped. He looked across the river. On the other shore there were palm trees and huts. An eagle flew past low along the river.

Joe said, 'Too many competitors and not enough money.'

'True.'

'This life is a financial problem.'

'You're right.'

'But a man must fly.'

'A man is not a bird.'

Joe didn't say anything. He finished the bottle of beer.

'Did you go and see Sarah?' Cata-cata asked.

'Yes.'

'What happened?'

'At first she didn't want to talk to me. Then we agreed to meet tonight.'

'I see.'

Joe looked across the river. He saw the trees against the sky.

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He saw the river softly rippling, softly flowing. He felt the wind cool beneath the warmth of the day. He felt peaceful. He was happy to see the crabs scuttling along the shore. He fell asleep and dreamt that he was paddling a canoe in a green bottle.

Then the midget with the big head and red eyes came to him and said: 'How are you?'

'I don't know. But how are you?'

'I am not feeling all that well.'

'What's wrong? Can I help?' Joe asked.

'Yes. I want you to give me back that thing I gave you. My life has been hell without it.'

'Please let me keep it. I will give you anything else you ask for.'

'If you want it, keep it.'

Joe didn't like the way the midget said that; so he gave the midget what he asked for.

'Thank you,' said the midget.

'Thank you,' said Joe.

'I am always happy to see you.'

'Thank you.'

'Don't thank me.'

'Okay. Tell me, what was that thing you gave me?'

'Bad luck,' the midget said, cheerfully.

'You are a true friend,' said Joe.

'So are you. Except for one thing. You've got your eyes always shut. Open them.'

Joe opened his eyes. Cata-cata was leaning over him.

'You've been talking in your sleep.'

'It's a small problem.'

'Have a tangerine.'

Joe peeled the tangerine and ate it. He felt light. He felt possessed of a secret wonder. The tangerine was cool in his mouth. He thought about prison. He thought about Sarah. He felt he had to turn off his thinking. He tried to, but he only succeeded in having an idea for his sixteenth lesson. He would call it: 'Turning Experience into Gold'.

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He said: 'It's my birthday soon. Things will get better after my birthday.'

'Yes. Things might get better.'

'And then the rainy season continues.'

'Ponds everywhere. Mud everywhere.'

They stared at the river.

Joe said: 'This life of mine has been one long fever. Now I feel I'm getting well.'

'That's good. That's good,' his friend said, smiling.

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Six Poems by Adam Zagajewski

The Blackened River

The blackened river ran through the park.
Past there, the numb gardens
were hemmed by thick braids of hedges.
Where starlings sang now, a branch
of Auschwitz had been built: under
the grass the bandages
from the Russian infirmary were interred,
therefore the meadow
is swollen and rich.
Gliders guiltlessly hovered in the sky,
in rain as benign as a tear of joy.

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Cruel

for Joseph Czapski

In the Parc de Saint Cloud, birds sang.
Alone in that vast narcissistic forest
overlooking Paris,
I pondered your words:
Cruel: the world, rapacious,
carnivorous, cruel.

I circled the Parc de Saint Cloud, East to West,
West to East,
I strolled through the leafless
chestnuts, bowed to the dark, bowing cedars,
heard pine cones cracked
by wrens and sparrows.
No beasts of prey in the park,
other than time, just then changing
from Winter to Spring, stripped,
an actor flinging his costume away,
backstage, in the chilled wings.

Cruel, I thought? Here is the killer,
abided by police and by priests—
even you indulge it,
the protagonist
of your paintings. But is there a choice?
A milder, softer world?
Trees more exquisite, cedars
with even darker needles, more sumptuous
feasts, moments of meditation
that thrust to the core of knowledge?
Is there a kinder, gentler time, eager
to give back those we've lost and to restore us
to ourselves, pure and young?

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A rose sky; tight, narrow ribbons of cloud.
The brown walls of prisons, hospitals, courts,
wailing corridors without end,
the moments of meditation, riven, imperilled
by fear, anxiety, lies.

I circled the Parc de Saint Cloud, faster, faster,
Winter finished, Spring not yet.
In the park, barren, bereft of its king,
I kept saying it, "cruel," my only witnesses
lizards and birds.
Then, through a dense mist the white sun boiled:
I was impaled by sharp barbs of bliss.

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A Fence. Chestnut Trees.

A fence. Chestnut trees. Bindweed. God.
A spider web, the hiding place
of first cause, and the thick grass:
between its blades the proofs of existence
shine like negatives drying.
The smell of braids and of wind
plaited in the mouth of the loved one.
Sour, the crushed stem
under the tongue.
Blackberries won't be
the apple of our discord.
Wind-flowers by the creek,
a ball getting away from the girl,
and ripe, yellow hawthorns
swaying softly.
Turn off the glaring sun,
listen to the tale of the seed of a poppy.
A fence. Chestnut trees. Bindweed. God.

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Codeword

Look, your life too is becoming
the oil in a lamp on whose surface
the weak blue flame of homeland wanders.
That country, like depression, will steal
your youth and turn it into a codeword,
will take your rapture and give grief;
that country, that clock that won't run,
black band on a sleeve,
that country where souls are in storage
and bodies are no one's because death
is paid in advance and it will come,
too early, at dawn, with its forehead of an ape,
too early, the clouds of morning, too early,
a prayer, kiss, the helpless children
fallen too early, and instead of orchids
the ashes of mountain September, cold fog,
the consoling lie, booze and not hell.

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A Warm, Small Rain

Night, an alien city, I roamed
a street with no name.
Stone steps submerged me deeper
in otherness and in thick Spring.

A warm, small rain: birds sang,
guardedly, tenderly, from afar.
Ship sirens in the port
wailed goodbye to the known earth.

In tenement windows, actors appeared,
from your dreams and my dreams: I knew
I was enroute to the future, that lost
epoch—a pilgrim trekking to Rome.

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Russia Comes Into Poland

for Joseph Brodsky

Through meadow and hedgerow, village and forest,
cavalries on the march, infantries on the march,
horses and cannons, old soldiers, young soldiers, children,
wiry wolfhounds at full gallop, a blizzard of feathers,
sleds, Black Marias, carriages, taxis,
even the old cars called Moskwitch come roaring in
and warships and rafts and pontoon bridges roar in
and barges, steamships, canoes, (some of which sink),
barrage balloons, missiles, bombers,
howitzer shells whistling arias from an opera,
the shriek of flagellants and the growl of commands,
songs slashing the air with notes made of steel,
yurts and tents break camp, ropes tightened,
the banners of dyed linen tremble overhead.
Messengers, panting, die as they run,
cables rush out, candles burning with quick crimson
flames,
colonels dozing in carriages faster than light,
popes piously murmuring blessings,
even the moon is along on that hard iron march.
Tanks, sabres, ropes,
Katyuasha big-bertha's whirring like comets,
fifes and drums exploding the air,
clubs crunching, the heaving decks of ferries
and of invasions sigh, sway, the sons of the Steppes
on the march, Moslems, condemned prisoners, lovers
of Byron, gamblers, the whole progeny
of Asia with Souvorov in the lead
limps in with a train of fawning courtiers who dance;
the yellow Volga runs in, Siberian rivers chanting,
camels plod pensively, bringing
the sands of the desert and humid mirages,
the folded-eyed Kirgises marching in step,
the black pupils of the God of the Urals
and behind them school teachers and languages straggle,
and behind them old manor houses skate in like gliders,

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and German doctors with dressings and plasters;
the wounded with their faces of albaster,
regiments and divisions, cavalries, infantries, on the march,
Russia comes into Poland,
tearing cobwebs, leaves, silk ribbons,
ligaments and frontiers,
breaking
treaties, bridges, alliances,
threads, ties, clothes lines with wet washing still waving,
gates, arteries, bandages and conjunctions,
future and hope;
Russia comes in, marching
into a hamlet on the Pilica,
into the deep Mazovia forests,
rending posters and parliaments,
trampling roads, footbridges, paths, streams.
Russia comes into the eighteenth century,
into October, September, laughter and tears,
into conscience, into the concentration
of the student, the calm silence of the warm bricks of a
wall,
comes into the fragrance
of meadows, herbs, the tangled path of the forest,
trampling
the pansy, the wild rose,
hoof-prints in the moss, tractor and tank prints
in the soft moss,
it overturns
chimneys, tree trunks, palaces,
turns off lights, makes great bonfires
out in the formal garden,
darkens the clear spring,
razes the library, church, town hall,
flooding its scarlet banners through the sky,
Russia comes into my life,
Russia comes into my thought,
Russia comes into my poetry.

—translated from the Polish
by C. K. Williams and Renata Gorczynski

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what he was the, he laughed he said next time I go to a dog fight I'll, I mean that's when everything began to get, when began to, did he. it all ~~went~~, when he never read to Billy/ He never read to Billy.

horn horn mad

Was it? hand, voice words pacing what had been lost fnd lost agn & agn &c; exploring idling -Was it? His hand finding its way under the sheet now, moving over drest & hummock corrugation of the ribs/ geography a over the rise & fall over finding its way down its corrugated path from crest to hummock (paraph his wrds disappntment &c) measuring pacing leading staying restraining (—wrds, disappntng someone else) exploring (restrain for what been lost & fnd & lost agn & again (into paraph prisoners of hopes, of othr peoples hopes) & (her) geography, to the hummock (—wends as the presumptn effrontry of takng resp for making someone restless happy) paused/on the hillock now (thrust of his own rise vs plain flank) to the someone (Irene) who is simply unhappy &c dry run futility of that/effort (agnst her flank) all of it to provoke her (pulls off the sheet) childrn choosng prnts & the heat of her evasion pulled away but her brst pressd at him —ng, just so they can get born? &c into chance. Bvry? Youll frget me? (Edie & gypsies) / the abrupt what, reintro of tlescope? rf pnev existnce? into reincarnatn & does it then turn? his pursuit (limp) into wrds, hers into ex?

Was it? His hand had idled its way under the sheet now, returning unseen and as though unattended to pause at her breast, he said perhaps it had more to do with disappointment/ not of being disappointed but of being afraid of disappointing someone else, his voice unhurried as the movement of his hand, pacing of it, disappointing someone close, of living on the edge of betrayal that was bound to come along one way or another, sooner or later, his fingertips failing their search over the soft unbroken rise under the sheet there and djscending a corrugated path to (basin &c

A manuscript page from William Gaddis's Carpenter's Gothic. *Three drafts in progression are identifiable on this single page. The first, starting* Was it?, *is two lines long. The next* Was it? *begins the second draft, which is seventeen lines long. The final draft (*Was it? *remains) is what appears in the book—pages 154–155 in the hard-cover edition. As for* horn horn mad, *Gaddis has no idea what these words refer to. Within the parentheses is material from outlines to be incorporated in a later draft.*

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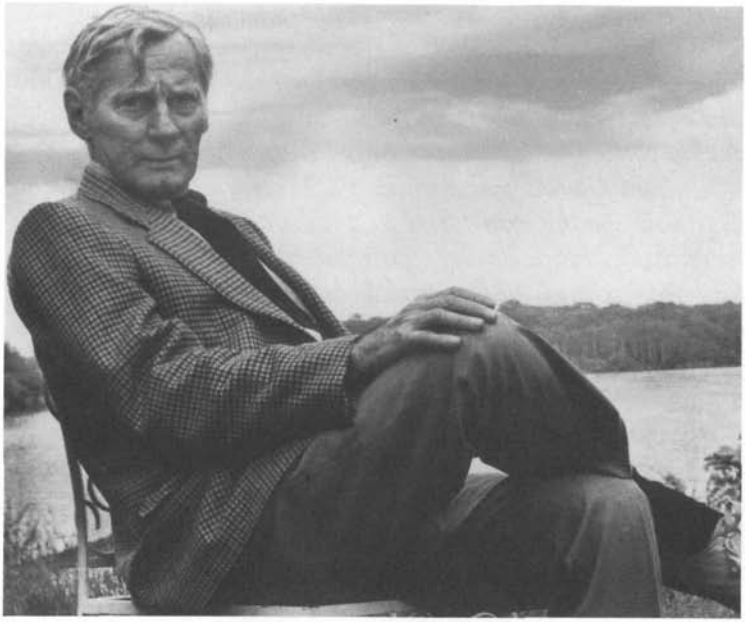

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The Art of Fiction CI
William Gaddis

William Gaddis was interviewed on November 4th, 1986, in Budapest where he had stopped for a day on his way home from a conference in Sofia. The proposal of an interview survived his discouraging reputation for being reclusive and avoiding interviews. A gentle and genial man welcomed me in his Atrium Hyatt suite: grey hair; an absorbed and attentive, hard-featured, longish face with strict yet amiable, contemplative eyes; and a relaxed, unassuming manner. He had a ghastly cold and spoke hoarsely, coughing slightly, and sipping meditatively at his whiskey.

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He listened to the questions with untiring patience. The remorseless logic as well as the profound care of his answers convinced me that this satiric chronicler of chaotic existence and entropic disintegration is indeed a fearful causal thinker deeply concerned about the human condition.

William Gaddis was born in 1922 in New York, where he lives now. In the mid-fifties he produced The Recognitions, *an entropic, black humor, postmodern novel. Yet in spite of his books' considerable artistic achievement, William Gaddis has still not received the degree of recognition that his talent and work deserve. Animated by a deep-seated humanism, he is a satirist who has no tolerance for stupidity and absurdity. With extraordinary erudition he examines man's relation to the world in witty, sarcastic, often mordant social-epistemological parables. His novels are:* The Recognitions *(1955),* JR, *a National Book Award winner, (1975), and* Carpenter's Gothic *(1985).*

INTERVIEWER

Since over the years you've acquired a reputation for avoiding interviews, particularly those which address your work, let me ask why you are submitting to this one?

WILLIAM GADDIS

I suppose because I've got some illusion about finally getting the whole thing out of the way once for all. In the past I've resisted partly because of the tendency I've observed of putting the man in the place of his work, and that goes back more than thirty years; it comes up in a conversation early in *The Recognitions*. That, and the conviction that the work has got to stand on its own—when ambiguities appear they are deliberate and I've no intention of running after them with explanations—and finally, of course, the threat of questions from someone unfamiliar with the work itself—"Do you work on a fixed schedule every day?" "On which side of the paper do you write?"—that sort of talk show pap, five-minute-celebrity, turning the creative artist into a performing one, which doesn't look to be the case here.

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INTERVIEWER

Thank you for the vote of confidence.

GADDIS

And so I've the hope of laying a few things to rest, an interview I can simply refer people to when the threat of another appears, without having to go through it again.

INTERVIEWER

You say a work has got to stand on its own. Isn't it hard for a writer sometimes to adhere to this principle steadfastly? In other words, are you never annoyed by misinterpretations of your works?

GADDIS

What writer is not? And unless you're writing "what they want," I mean, some formula simply for the money, isn't that our history, from Melville on? It comes with the territory, as the playwright said.

INTERVIEWER

Now that you have decided to step out of your reclusiveness—and before stepping back into it—perhaps you're dissatisfied with the image that is in circulation concerning your life and personality and views that you'd like to correct?

GADDIS

I'd hoped this interview would clear up some of that—what *can* be cleared up, that is to say, because trying to correct one's "image" is as futile as it is irrelevant. Of course, if your image is really all you've got going—which is hardly uncommon these days—take a Henry Kissinger, for instance—you'll want to deliberately distort the record to make yourself look good. I'd go back to *The Recognitions* where Wyatt asks what people want from the man they didn't get from his work, because presumably that's where he's tried to distill this "life and personality and views" you speak of. What's any artist but the dregs

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of his work: I gave that line to Wyatt thirty odd years ago and as far as I'm concerned it's still valid.

INTERVIEWER

Here is another obligatory question. You have received recognition in the form of various grants and awards, including the substantial MacArthur Prize Fellowship. What is your feeling about that? How have they changed things?

GADDIS

Well, I almost think that if I'd gotten the Nobel Prize when *The Recognitions* was published I wouldn't have been terribly surprised. I mean that's the grand intoxication of youth, or what's a heaven for. And so the book's reception was a sobering experience, quite a humbling one. When finally help did come along, recognition as you say, a Rockefeller Foundation grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the National Endowment for the Arts, they came in difficult times and allowed and encouraged me to keep on with the second book and start the third. Without them, I wonder if I might not just have dropped the whole damned business, though God knows what else I might have done, too late even to be any of the things I never wanted to be. There's always the talk about feeding at the public trough, disdaining grants because you've never been given one. I mean we'd all wish to come out with the fierce integrity of Samuel Butler, say, who never wrote simply to publish or published everything he wrote—*The Way of All Flesh* was posthumous after all—and that has been the luxury of the MacArthur. But then I never was a fellow to rush into print.

INTERVIEWER

Could you say something about the genesis of your own novels? Can you reconstruct what was involved in your getting started with *The Recognitions?*

GADDIS

I think first it was that towering kind of confidence of being

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quite young, that one can do anything—"All's brave that youth mounts and folly guides," as we're told in *As You Like It*. *The Recognitions* started as a short piece of work, quite undirected, but based on the Faust story. Then as I got into the idea of forgery, the entire concept of forgery became—I wouldn't say an obsession—but a central part of everything I thought and saw; so the book expanded from simply the central character of the forger to forgery, falsification and cheapening of values and what have you, everywhere. Looking at it now with its various faults, I suppose excess would be the main charge. I remember Clive Bell looking back on his small fine book, *Art*, thirty-five years after it was published in 1913, and listing *its* faults, finding it too confident and aggressive, even too optimistic—I was never accused of that!—but still feeling, as he said, "a little envious of the adventurous young man who wrote it."

INTERVIEWER

What moved you to write *JR*?

GADDIS

Even though I should have known from *The Recognitions* that the world was not waiting breathlessly for my message, that it already knew, and was quite happy to *live* with all these false values, I'd always been intrigued by the charade of the so-called free market, so-called free enterprise system, the stock market conceived of as what was called a "people's capitalism" where you "owned a part of the company" and so forth. All of which is true; you own shares in a company, so you literally do own part of the assets. But if you own a hundred shares out of six or sixty or six hundred million, you're not going to influence things very much. Also the fact that people buy securities—the very word in this context is comic—not because they are excited by the product—often you don't know what the company makes—but simply for profit: the stock looks good and you buy it. The moment it looks bad you sell it. What had actually happened in the company is not your concern. In many ways I thought . . . the

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childishness of all this. Because JR himself, which is why he is eleven years old, is motivated only by good-natured greed. *JR* was, in other words, to be a commentary on this free enterprise system running out of control. Looking around us now with a two trillion dollar federal deficit and billions of private debt and the banks, the farms, basic industry all in serious trouble, it seems to have been rather prophetic.

INTERVIEWER

Carpenter's Gothic?

GADDIS

Well, that was rather different. I cannot really work unless I set a problem for myself to solve. In *Carpenter's Gothic* the problems were largely of style and technique and form. I wanted to write a shorter book, one which observes the unities of time and place to the point that everything, even though it expands into the world, takes place in one house, and a country house at that, with a small number of characters, in a short span of time. It became really largely an exercise in style and technique. And also, I wanted to take all these clichés of fiction to bring them to life and make them work. So we have the older man and the younger woman, the marriage breaking up, the obligatory adultery, the locked room, the mysterious stranger and so forth.

INTERVIEWER

To have a more detailed look at the novels now. *The Recognitions* takes its title from *Recognitions*, a work attributed to St. Clement of Rome. The Wyatt Gwyon of your novel is thus a Clement figure with a dispersed family—there are many more dispersed families in the novel—and with a story that becomes a dialogue between pagan and Christian ideologies, and becomes a search for salvation, to mention the most obvious parallels. What was your main intention in introducing a Clement figure into the twentieth century, in a story that starts a few years after the First World War and takes place mainly at the turn of the decades of the forties and fifties?

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GADDIS

We come back to the Faust story and to the original Clementine *Recognitions*, which has been called the first Christian novel (I remember thinking mine was going to be the last one), about his search for salvation, redemption and so forth. And I had these notions of basing *The Recognitions* on the constant presence of the past and of its imposition of myth in different forms which eventually come down to the same stories in any culture. I think they titled the Italian edition *The Pilgrim* or *The Pilgrimage* or something like that. In a sense it *is* that: a pilgrimage toward salvation.

INTERVIEWER

Disregarding now the immense symbolic-thematic complexity that the myth itself entails in the novel, I think that the logic of the Faust story lends itself particularly well to the message about the postmodern world, namely, manipulation and forgery. The Faustian pact with the devil is nothing but giving up originality, isn't it? And vice versa, a painter, Wyatt, manipulated into selling his soul, giving up originality, is bound to be Faustian, besides being emblematic of the artist's position in a corrupt, manipulative, counterfeit world. Is this a correct interpretation of Wyatt's central function as a Faust figure?

GADDIS

It is, yes, originality also being Satan's "original sin" if you like. I think also, further, I tried to make clear that Wyatt was the very height of a *talent* but not a genius—quite a different thing. Which is why he shrinks from going ahead in, say, works of originality. He shrinks from this and takes refuge in what is already there, which he *can* handle, manipulate. He can do quite perfect forgeries, because the parameters of perfection are already there.

INTERVIEWER

If Joyce's Stephen Dedalus of the *Portrait* was the archetypal modernist artist, your Wyatt's story seems to be a *postmodern*

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variation on the "Künstler-roman." Wyatt does, in fact, come to be called Stephen at the end of the novel. He, too, abandons the idea of priesthood to become a priest of the imagination. But with a difference. He will paint *forgeries*, that is, he will become the priest of *other people's* imagination. Stephen Dedalus's "non serviam"—an attitude that echoes down in *Ulysses*, too—is no longer possible.

GADDIS

This is quite a complicated question. First, what is interesting is this business of *Ulysses* . . .

INTERVIEWER

I mean the *Portrait*. I know you had not read *Ulysses* before you wrote *The Recognitions*.

GADDIS

Right. Many of these similarities which critics and doctoral students have dug up are absolutely coincidences. Stephen, for instance—the reason I chose that name is he was the first Christian martyr.

INTERVIEWER

That's why Joyce decided on that name. It was one of his reasons.

GADDIS

News to me. The coincidences turn up down to the smallest details. There is, for instance, a character who has covered the mirrors with handkerchiefs. Apparently this happens somewhere in *Ulysses*, too. And they said, "Ah! This is where he got that." Where I got it was when I was in a hotel in Panama and I had washed my handkerchiefs and spread them on the windows and the mirrors to dry—they almost look pressed when they're peeled away that way—a Panamanian friend came in and said, "All the mirrors are covered. Who's dead? What's happened?" I said, "No, I'm just drying my handkerchiefs." Then I found the same incident in *McTeague* in

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what? 1903 or 1905, whenever *McTeague* was written. This always strikes me as dangerous—finding "sources."

INTERVIEWER

So let's forget about Joyce. Let me repeat the main point of my question to make it clearer perhaps. It was something like this: though on the one hand there is this forgery and serving other people's imagination, on the other hand, at a deeper level, isn't there a deeper appreciation of the real, genuine art of the past, an appreciation of tradition as a source of inspiration for the present?

GADDIS

Looking back—of course this is thirty-five years ago—the essential point was that these painters lived in an age of belief, and so they were, from Giotto on, very safely encased in a frame of reference, working in a frame of Absolutes for their talents or their genius, in works largely for the Church. And this is exactly what Wyatt does not have around him. So he is really taking refuge in that framework of belief, as Stanley, his counterpoint, is the one who *is* within this framework of belief, the good Catholic boy, who finally pays the price.

INTERVIEWER

The Recognitions is a very serious book. Especially if one considers that it begins and ends with death and that there is much of the apocalyptic in between. If it is read as a piece of satire, it only makes it an even more serious book since it seems to have been written in the best tradition of "noble indignation." On the other hand I wonder if it is not read too earnestly by too many critics. Especially if one considers that it opens on All Saints' Day when somebody—whose body will be canonized as a result of a ridiculous mistake—dies of appendicitis at the hands of a fake doctor, and ends on Easter Sunday when instead of resurrection a devout organist (Stanley, the good Catholic boy) is buried in the collapse of a church. This is closer to burlesque.

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GADDIS

Well, what I wanted was a large comic novel. I was very frustrated when it came out and so many reviewers saw it as . . . that terrible word "erudition" kept appearing. That it was difficult . . .

INTERVIEWER

And it *is* difficult.

GADDIS

. . . that it was among the first books of black humor and so forth, but, of course, we all came out of Mark Twain's vest pocket. No one has ever beaten "The Mysterious Stranger." But that whole world of the amount of information, what they called erudition, frightened off many people. Very very few reviewers said it is often very funny. It was a sometimes heavy-handed satire but I wanted it to be a large comic novel in the great tradition.

INTERVIEWER

In other senses the novel is not read earnestly enough. Most critics point out that the novel is about disintegration, about a world which is in a mess, is entropic. But Steven Moore's arguments about Wyatt finding human integrity amidst disintegration seem convincing. So the novel itself is negentropic rather than entropic in the last analysis.

GADDIS

Well, we hope. Many reviewers and critics draw attention to all my books as being hopeless, that no good is going to come of anything, that everything is winding down in the entire entropic concept. But Wyatt's line, I think late in the book, says that one must simply live through the corruption, even become part of it. As Esme, the model, is a quite corrupted person but still an innocent in some way. Well, Wyatt has been part of the corruption, but at the end he says we must simply live it through and make a fresh start. I mean you could almost say—though the way the phrase is used now is *not* what I

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mean—that it is a notion of being born again in *this* life, with no reference to our "born again" Christians, and the next one.

INTERVIEWER

Apropos of Wyatt being born again: can his struggle for originality be regarded as the antihero's struggle to become a hero? He is a student of perspective, who reaches "the vanishing point" early in the novel but begins to emerge as a sovereign personality again at the end.

GADDIS

The latter part of what you say is true. The earlier part about antihero and hero is an interesting interpretation. I did want to, in a sense, create a novel without a hero, but while he remains the central figure, facets all about him are carrying out his—the fashionable word today I guess—persona. Otto is a kind of two-dimensional imitation of Wyatt; he wants to be Wyatt but has none of the equipment. Stanley has the belief and so forth. Anselm has the despair. So they're all reflections of him. They carry the activity—you don't say "action," you say "activity"—of the novel, while he is not anywhere in sight.

INTERVIEWER

Alchemy has an important role to play in *The Recognitions*. What attracted you to alchemy and what makes it a relevant device in a satiric exploration of early and mid-*twentieth* century reality?

GADDIS

My early impression was that the alchemists were simply trying to turn base metals into gold. Later I came to the more involved reading and better understanding of it all—that it was something between religion and magic and that it did not necessarily mean literally lead and gold. So the gold in many of the symbolic senses in alchemy is the perfection, is the sun, is a kind of redemption. When at some despairing moment Wyatt says—when he realizes that the table of the Seven Deadly Sins is the original and not his copy—"Thank God

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there was the gold to forge," that is very much the key line to the whole book.

INTERVIEWER

The Recognitions—says John Aldridge—was published before the literature to which it was pioneer came into vogue. Did you discern signs of an influence that your novel exerted on the fabulators and black humor writers?

GADDIS

No, because I don't read a great deal of current fiction, especially when I'm working on my own. I don't look for these influences. Even if I did, I would prefer not to say, "Yes, I think he learnt from me," or what have you. Let the critics do that.

INTERVIEWER

While *The Recognitions* prefigured the style of the Pynchon generation, I wonder if there was any Pynchonian influence that went into your second novel, *JR*, which opens with a *direct* discussion of the questions of energy, disorder, chaos, entropy, the second law of thermodynamics?

GADDIS

Well, going back a bit further, Nathanael West had sketched entropy nicely in *Miss Lonelyhearts* in the early thirties. Norbert Wiener extrapolated the concept to communications around 1950, and, of course, entropy was mentioned in connection with *The Recognitions*. So I think both Pynchon and I—and I don't know him—are simply involved with different aspects of the same problems. I would doubt that my work has influenced him; his has certainly not influenced mine in any way at all.

INTERVIEWER

Although there is a time-honored tradition of the satirical treatment of human stupidity from Aristophanes through Erasmus, Swift, Twain to Vonnegut—it is Vonnegut's "Jonah," the narrator of *Cat's Cradle* with his interest in "the history

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of human stupidity," that I am especially reminded of by your theoretician of stupidity, McCandless, in *Carpenter's Gothic.*

GADDIS

Again, I think writers work from their own energies, their own concepts. I don't think there is any influence among us. After all, stupidity—and I don't mean ignorance—is a central issue of our time. In my own case, going back to entropy, I'm most intrigued by its correlation as the loss of available energy in a closed system with stupidity as the corresponding loss of available intelligence in our own political establishment especially as regards foreign policy and the economy, its collapse that is to say, where Wiener sees physics' view of the world as it actually exists replaced by one as we observe it, a kind of one way communication.

INTERVIEWER

The story of the dwarfish sixth grader, who begins with mail-order enterprise and becomes the head of a huge business conglomerate, is also about the American family—a bitter indictment of the corroding effect that profit-oriented corporate operations exert not only on education and art in particular but also on social values and human relationships in general.

GADDIS

It is insofar as it is very much about the absence of the family. We know nothing about his father. All that we know about his mother is that she's a nurse, who keeps odd hours because of her work. He has no past, in other words, and so he's obliged to invent himself, not in the terms of a father, a mother and a family but in terms of what he sees around him. And all he sees around him—in all discussions in the principal's office at the school—there is never any mention of actual educational content. They talk about nothing but paving the parking lot, about buying new teaching machines and teaching equipment and storing what they already have because no one knows how to use it, and so forth.

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INTERVIEWER

And there is that other family, the musician's. I forget the name. . .

GADDIS

Yes, Bast, who is, of course, a captive remnant of the past, of the "old family," Turgenev's romantic Arkady meeting up with the hard-nosed pragmatist Bazarov as it were. Speaking of influences, I think mine are more likely to be found going from Eliot *back* rather than forward to my contemporaries.

INTERVIEWER

Is JR's story something you extrapolated from life only, or did you rely on sociologies devoted to how the corporate world works upon social values, human qualities and relationships in American culture?

GADDIS

The boy himself is a total invention, completely *sui generis*. The reason he is eleven is because he is in this prepubescent age where he is amoral, with a clear conscience, dealing with people who are immoral, unscrupulous; they realize what scruples are, but push them aside, whereas his good cheer and greed he considers perfectly normal. He thinks this is what you're supposed to do; he is not going to wait around; he is in a hurry, as you should be in America—get on with it, get going. He is very scrupulous about obeying the *letter* of the law and then (never making the distinction) evading the *spirit* of the law at every possible turn. He *is* in these ways an innocent and is well-meaning, a sincere hypocrite. With Bast, he does think he's helping him out. As for the corporate world, I do read the newspapers, clip things, ideas, articles, and just use them as fodder. But all that hardly requires a text in sociology. And this may be the place to make a further point. I'm frequently seen in the conservative press as being out there on the barricades shouting "down with capitalism!" I do see it in the end as really the most workable system we've produced. So what we're talking about is not the system itself, but its

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abuses, I don't mean criminal but the abundant abuses just *within* the letter of the law. The essential question is whether it can survive these abuses given free rein and whether these abuses are inherent in the system itself. I should think it is perfectly clear in my work—calling attention, satirizing these abuses—that our best hope lies in bringing things under better and more equitable control, cutting back the temptations to unmitigated greed and bemused dishonesty . . . in other words that these abuses the system has fostered are not essential, but running out of moral or ethical control can certainly threaten its survival.

INTERVIEWER

What *JR* is about is a radically new situation from the point of view of the American dream, too, and radically new as a literary treatment of that theme: the novel seems to be about how the American dream claims you before you are socially mature enough to dream it.

GADDIS

Fine, yes, well put. Very much the heart of it in fact.

INTERVIEWER

But the *writer* of *JR* must have commanded an immense inward knowledge of the mentality and the clichés of the jungle of speculation and manipulation to enable him to write the book. Is this formidable "documentation" mainly veristic or intuitive?

GADDIS

I think both, in the sense that the earlier book was too. It is getting a central idea—in one case the forgery, in the other case the American dream turned inside out—and *then* seeking the documentation, in areas that essentially don't greatly interest me, that simply provide vehicles. But I wanted them right, thinking *if* someone who is well-versed and familiar with the world of finance, with what goes on in the market and so forth, read *JR* . . . that even though it's a quite improbable

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story, it is still possible. So that JR backs into the situation; he isn't sure really what is happening. But in the beginning, what is very important, he is not viewed as one of these computer wizard brilliant kids. He buys defaulted bond issues simply because they're cheap—it says a thousand dollars up in the corner, but selling at seven cents on the dollar, he's getting them for seventy dollars apiece. So it's simple, cheerful greed. Then, when finally the corporation is thrown into bankruptcy, and they wipe out all of the stock, all the equities, he becomes the largest holder of preferred stock and takes control pretty much by default. This is not through his brilliance. But, of course, when he does end up with this textile mill, Eagle Mills, and reads in the paper about this brilliant financial person in New York who has taken over, he believes the myth that has been created around him. And, finally, by the end of the book, he *is* a prisoner of his own myth; he thinks that he *is* a brilliant financial operator. When it all collapses, he says, "Well, why do they blame me?"

INTERVIEWER

Earlier you mentioned the irrelevant activities of educators in JR's world. Your satire concerning education is quite passionate. You must have had bad experiences.

GADDIS

No, really the opposite, in fact. I went to boarding school in New England when I was very young, and to college at Harvard and had a good education. And so it was: looking around me as I became thirty and forty and fifty at what goes on, thinking this is not what serious education is all about.

INTERVIEWER

The humanities can do anything but humanize these school children in *JR*. And your view of art has not changed since *The Recognitions*, as evidenced by figures like Bast, the composer, Eigen, the novelist and Gibbs, the encyclopedist. What makes you place art at the center of fraud and counterfeit in the modern world?

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GADDIS

Let me start off with this observation, touching perhaps on my earlier ones on the crushing abuses of capitalism. Frequently enough, careless or predisposed readers, John Gardner for instance, see these books as chronicles of the dedicated artist crushed by commerce, which is, of course, to miss, or misread, or simply disregard all the evidence of *their own* appetite for destruction, their frequently eager embrace of the forces to be blamed for their failure to pursue the difficult task for which their talents have equipped them, failure to pursue their destiny if you like, taking art at the center, as you say, as redemption in, and of and from, a world of material values, overwhelmed by the material demands it imposes. The embittered character in *JR*, for instance, who is Eigen, is obviously based in part on my own experience with *The Recognitions*, that it was not a success when it was published and I was obliged to go and work in a pharmaceutical company, which I did not like, but I had a family and had to make a living. Next, Gibbs, who is very much a persona; obviously his name is from Willard Gibbs of the second law of thermodynamics and the concept of entropy. Gibbs is the man who has all of the feelings and the competency but is overcome, overwhelmed by a sense of the futility of doing anything and the consequent question of what is worth doing, which he cannot respond to. And so even though he *could've* done this, he *could've* done this, he *could've* done this, he doesn't *finish* anything because he just thinks it's not worth it, whatever it is. So that finally, when he has been quite a negative figure all the way through, and meets a woman who has great confidence and faith and love for him, and wants him to complete his own work, he tries to go back, but it's too late. Bast starts with great confidence, the sort I mentioned earlier, that confidence of youth. He's going to write grand opera. And gradually, if you noticed—because of pressures of reality on him and money and so forth—his ambitions shrink. The grand opera becomes a cantata where we have the orchestra and the voices. Then it becomes a piece for orchestra, then a piece for small orchestra, and finally at the end he's writing a piece for unaccompanied

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cello, his own that is to say, one small voice trying to rescue it all and say, "Yes, there *is* hope." Again, like Wyatt, living it through, and in his adventure with JR having lived through all the nonsense, he will rescue this one small hard gem-like flame, if you like. Because it is that *real* note of hope in *JR* that is very important. It's the kind of thing that someone like John Gardner totally missed. Finally, it's the artist as "inner-directed" confronting a materialistic world—brokers, bankers, salesmen, factory workers, most politicians, the lot—that JR himself represents, and which is "outer-directed," if you want it in sociological terms.

INTERVIEWER

What do the letters *J* and *R* stand for?

GADDIS

A sort of abbreviation for Junior.

INTERVIEWER

And also his class at school perhaps. He is going to 6J. If that has got anything to do with it at all.

GADDIS

No-no-no, that *J* is Mrs. Joubert, the teacher. This is what I mean about being wary of tracing down sources, inferences; Gardner, I think, traced the name Bast down to some Greek reference, which was, of course, nonsense.

INTERVIEWER

Africa seems to be very much on your mind both in *JR* and in *Carpenter's Gothic*. Why does Africa figure so conspicuously in your imagination?

GADDIS

In this last book, in *Carpenter's Gothic*, it is very important because of what the scheme of the book becomes, which is the book of Genesis emerging from the fiery holocaust that

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created the Great Rift Valley from Lebanon down through Israel, down through the Red Sea and all the way down East Africa, as where man was born, where he emerged, as in fact much of modern paleontology confirms. In Genesis, we have prehistory told in the Lord raining down fire and brimstone, and by the time we get to the last book of the New Testament in Revelation, this whole apocalyptic notion, which many people, especially in the Fundamentalist Christian movement in America, read literally, and feel that all this talk about the Bomb is a kind of logical apocalypse and Marxism the great Beast, and they put that together with what they read in Revelation. And so, as McCandless says in the book, many of these people who feel that apocalypse is coming must make peace, not with God, but with Jesus, as the go-between, take Jesus as one's savior so that when he does appear, and calls up the faithful, they all rise to heaven and are saved in this self-fulfilling prophecy. If a war did start in Africa or any place else with the nuclear bombs and so forth, they would feel, ah! now the wrongdoers, the ones who did not accept Jesus, are going to get it, that we are going to be—of course they're also going to be—incinerated.

INTERVIEWER

The title of *Carpenter's Gothic* is explained in the novel by the owner of the Victorian house built in that style as the Hudson Valley country architects' derivative style, "to be seen from the outside," and "a patchwork of conceits, borrowings, deceptions." More than one critic suggested that the other meaning of "Gothic" functions in the novel, too, the novel being "a spoof of Gothic romances," as Peter S. Prescott puts it. Let me wonder about the first half of the title, "carpenter," though. Has it got anything to do with the Town Carpenter of *The Recognitions*—Wyatt's maternal grandfather, who is a storehouse of adventurous stories just as McCandless in *Carpenter's Gothic* is the mysterious adventurer, whose adventures turn out to exist in a madman's imagination in the end, mere stories?

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GADDIS

It never occurred to me—we're back with this second-guessing sources, connections—but ideas do come forth and then submerge and come out in another form, which in a way both books are all about. One critical discussion I read discussed Wyatt's first job with a bridge building concern which I'd conceived simply to get across his fascination with the idea of tensions, the delicacy of bridges and the tensions that are involved, the idea of strength in delicacy, in tension, but this dissertation ingeniously related his career as bridge builder to his father as pontifex, a priest, the bridge between God and man, and I thought this was marvelous. When I read things like that, I just keep quiet. I think, "Well, if they want to think I'm that clever—fine."

INTERVIEWER

McCandless is a good "carpenter," anyway, since he exposes what is behind the fanciful religious and political facade of those other "carpenters"—Reverend Ude, the fake Evangelist and Senator Teakell, the corrupt politician. So contrary to what his name suggests—"candle-less," namely, absence of light (perhaps a reference to his madness)—this "mad" carpenter is a molder of *correct* theories about how things fall into a pattern in the world, theories that *do* shed light on what is going on. But why must a seer be a lunatic?

GADDIS

A seer being an illuminated person and an illuminator—is this what you . . .

INTERVIEWER

I meant the wife's revelation about him at the end, with the implication that he has spent time in a mental institution.

GADDIS

But that's simply an implication isn't it? I mean these are areas in my work that I don't care to comment on. I think it says somewhere in *The Recognitions* that you cannot run along

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after your work saying what I really meant was this or this or this. Generally of all these questions: when I've worked on a book, I've put just as much into it as I wanted to, and if there are ambiguities, well, life is filled with them.

INTERVIEWER

I'm not asking if he was or was not really mad. What I mean is that the hint that he was, or even the ambiguity created about his sanity makes one wonder why it is that an illuminator should be at least potentially mad?

GADDIS

Well, you may make that inference. Or comment. I have no objection.

INTERVIEWER

McCandless is ironically undercut as a Messiah at the end, this much is perhaps safe to say. Where does it leave us with the novel? Is the ironic undercutting "a straw of hope" as Cynthia Ozick hopes it is—that the world is not so dark after all, that it was only a madman's vision?

GADDIS

Again, there's an informed and positive interpretation; after all, if our situation—or what I see as our situation—were utterly hopeless, why would I have written the book at all? But I will say that this novel probably contains the least hope of the three. Because McCandless, who had got it all figured out, comes out at the end—when we realize that he is just leaving the scene and wants Liz to go with him—as hardly the great hero. It is sort of *sauve-qui-peut* and she refuses him. Incidentally, "carpenter" without the apostrophe, "carpenter Gothic" is the correct phrase for this style of architecture, as Lester mentions in the book. So the apostrophe, yes, is a play on the architectural style, and on McCandless, and on the Lord's Father's ramshackle house wherein "are many mansions" and on the author too as "the carpenter."

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INTERVIEWER

What Paul helps the fundamentalist Ude and other anti-evolutionist carpenters to cut, frame, join and hammer into shape is something political that may turn out to be an Armageddon for America, according to the novel. Amidst all this Liz is "the only straight number." If this is a bit exaggerated, the second half of what her brother, Billy—yet another carpenter of yet another counterfeit front (counterculture)—says is true: Liz is "the only thing that holds things together." It occurs to me to ask if she is not an embodiment of the female universe that Wyatt's quest is for in *The Recognitions?* The female universe is not absent from the world of *Carpenter's Gothic,* as it was not from the world of *The Recognitions*; rather, the world stifles it, kills it—Liz is asthmatic and is dead in the end.

GADDIS

I think that is valid. Just as in *JR* where Madame Joubert *is* this force of love, trust, hope, what have you. The *ewigweibliche* and so forth, but the thwarted, betrayed by lack of love *ewigweibliche*, the defeated *Frau, nach der man sich sehnt* (as is Esme in *The Recognitions*) they are all the realm of intuitive wisdom in a world of masculine materialism and so, as you may have noticed, at the end of *JR* it is the two unloved women who are going to be locked in a legal battle, reduced to being men you might say, after the men have messed everything up. In that book they're the despairing survivors.

INTERVIEWER

Although *Carpenter's Gothic* seems to be a little like the schoolbooks that are criticized in the novel—questions are asked to which no firm answers are offered—it *is* a book of beliefs and not, as Gardner would have said, "dramatization without belief." This is satire and the beliefs are present indirectly—the satirist believes in those things whose absence is resented when what is negative is destroyed.

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GADDIS

Deeply resented, yes, because we're really back to the heart of it here, aren't we? What we're really talking about—what the book is so largely talking about, leaving behind alchemy and Wyatt's "thank God there was the gold to forge"—is precisely this courage to live without Absolutes, which is, really, nothing more than growing up, the courage to accept a relative universe and even one verging upon chance, certainly at least in its human component, since these Absolutes are essentially childish, born out of fear of a purposeless existence and finally, out of the desperate denial of the one unacceptable inevitable outrage, the prospect of one's own death itself. Of course all this leads us into the sketchy refuge of situation ethics, old foes with new faces, because looked at another way this collapse of Absolutes going on around us may be simply another form of entropy, a spiritual entropy winding down eventually to total equilibrium, the ultimate chaos where everything equals everything else: the ultimate senseless universe. But then that, fighting that off, or succumbing to it, isn't that what Dostoyevsky, what the great fictions have always been about?

INTERVIEWER

The man who wrote these three books seems to be just about fed up with two thousand years of wars and especially with the modern world, which is all fraud and forgery. Is it that bad?

GADDIS

I think it *is* but we must simply live with it.

INTERVIEWER

The Gaddis novels are also difficult books. This has become a critical commonplace.

GADDIS

I'm afraid.

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INTERVIEWER

So let me ask some obligatory questions about your art in general. First, why the proliferation of characters in the first two books?

GADDIS

In the first two books. Well, as I say, the first one I wanted to be a large comic novel . . . with characters reflecting facets of the central figure, who for all practical purposes, disappears; they carry on. This was part of the reason for *that* proliferation. In *JR* it was much more in the realm of these theories of entropy in communication and the breakdown of communication. So that especially in the school, where most of the time no one is listening to anyone else—they're all talking—there's some attempt in their patterns of speech to differentiate. Some readers have said. "I don't know who's talking about what, and I give up." But that's the chance, the risk that I took.

INTERVIEWER

Are you guided by theoretical preconceptions concerning the human personality and character when you sit down to write your—as they have also been called—"post-psychological" novels?

GADDIS

Insofar as these are a culmination of one's experiences and ideas and impressions, prejudices and inner doubts, of course. But the task is to make the characters alive and come off the page as real. In *JR* it's much more a number of voices creating the story, the world they live in. In *Carpenter's Gothic* it's much more the point of very few characters, each of whom is forcefully and severely self-delineated.

INTERVIEWER

Do you deploy preconceived aesthetic philosophies concerning language and communication when you sit down to work?

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GADDIS

As I say, it is all simply *in* sitting down to work and the working, not with any theoretic notions. I did make *the* basic decision in *JR* largely, as I've said, in terms of setting a problem to solve. Often it's very frustrating, but otherwise I would die of boredom at the typewriter. So I have to—in order to avoid boredom—have the energy . . . set a problem. In *JR* it was writing a long book almost entirely in dialogue with no chapter breaks and so forth, which led me into the problem of real time because I could not say, "Chapter Four," or "two weeks later." I had somehow to make that time pass in dialogue.

INTERVIEWER

So there must have been aesthetic decisions . . .

GADDIS

But they're not out of a theory.

INTERVIEWER

I call your book-length dialogues "floated dialogue" because while you present everything through dialogues—background information, letters, newspaper articles, radio texts, TV texts—too many outlines become blurred, persons and objects are externally undifferentiated, everything is allowed to be viewed through what is spoken only. The omniscient narrator gives insignificant, descriptive details of the *physical situation* in which the dialogue is carried on, but he is of no help with what the reader would be really interested in.

GADDIS

I will tell you something in that area, if you like a theory, which I may have come up with after I wrote the book—I'm not sure. It is the notion that the reader is brought in almost as a collaborator in creating the picture that emerges of the characters, of the situation, of what they look like, everything. So this authorial absence which everyone from Flaubert to

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Barthes talks about, is the sense that the book is a collaboration between the reader and what is on the pages.

INTERVIEWER

But the floated dialogue makes the reader's part very difficult. The omniscient narrator expresses no view of his own. The reader is left to imagine the psychological motivation behind what is said. What the reader is left with—in the absence of reliable authorial/narratorial information and of the psychologically more reliable direct interior monologue form—is what could be called "vocal behaviorism."

GADDIS

Well, this interior monologue you speak of *is* just too easy, obvious, boring, lazy, and I would agree right up to the last; I always cringe at the word "behaviorism." But again it is very much this notion of what the reader is obliged to supply. We go back to McLuhan and his talk about hot and cool media. Television is the hot medium, to which one contributes nothing except a blank stare, and the next day you say, "What was that show we saw last night on television?" It disappears because you put nothing into it. So nothing remains, as Gibbs remarks in *JR*. In this case it was my hope—for many readers it worked, for others it did not—that having made some effort they would not read too agonizedly slowly and carefully, trying to figure out who is talking and so forth. It was the *flow* that I wanted, for the readers to read and be swept along, to participate. And enjoy it. And occasionally chuckle, laugh along the way.

INTERVIEWER

But if they read along like that, they may miss a lot.

GADDIS

This is a risk I take, but isn't that what life is, after all? Missing something that's right there before you?

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INTERVIEWER

The flood of dialogues may intensify the sense of claustrophobia some readers experience. Several critics believe that you lose control over your talent in your first two novels, this is why they are so long, 956 pages and 726 pages. Are you concerned with structure when you write?

GADDIS

Of course, acutely so, with outline after outline even to paragraphs. And this sounds very odd for me to say, not of *The Recognitions* perhaps, but *JR* and *Carpenter's Gothic* both—*JR* especially is a very economical novel. That is one thing I hope I learned from Evelyn Waugh, economy. No one would believe this. *I* think a great deal of information is there of every sort, very economically got together. But critics will say whatever . . .

INTERVIEWER

Do you write the way you do because this is the easiest way for you to write, or, are such "difficult" works difficult to write too? What is it that causes particular difficulty in creating this type of a novel?

GADDIS

Well, as I've tried to make clear, if the work weren't difficult I'd die of boredom. After *The Recognitions*, where there is a great deal of authorial intrusion and little essays along the way, on alchemy or what have you, I found it was too easy and I didn't want to do it again. I wanted to write something different. I wanted to do something which was challenging, to create other problems, to force this discipline on myself, particularly with the last book. It's all discipline. But I certainly can't agree with that notion of whatever talent I may have going out of control. I think whatever talent there may be has been very painfully controlled, perhaps too much so.

INTERVIEWER

Do you regard yourself an experimental writer?

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GADDIS

No. I think of "experimental" as something that may not work. When I sit down with a concept and what I've said about discipline and so on—what I'm going to do—I don't think it's experimental.

INTERVIEWER

It's probably the dialogue form primarily that makes people label you as "experimental." The novel is turned into a drama, as if it were, staged almost, "theatricalized." The narrator is just a kind of stage director who does not interfere with the play.

GADDIS

But that's exactly the point isn't it, not to interfere. The attempt in the last two books was to make the characters create themselves, which is true of movies or the stage, and essentially of life itself. Of course, on the stage you can *see* the people. You see that he's tall or short or fat or what have you. Here the only devices are: "Where did you get that terrible suit?" Or one person may say to the other something that *is* descriptive of that person. But only if it's essential because this, to me, is again for the reader to supply, and I think feel rewarded in doing so.

INTERVIEWER

Creative reading. Critics have also created various labels that they affixed to your work: the encyclopedic novel, novel of excess and so on. If you were to stamp a label that would describe your works best the way *you* see them, what would that label be?

GADDIS

Maybe in ten years, when I am finished, I will give you an answer to that.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of labels like "postmodern," "black humor," "metafiction"?

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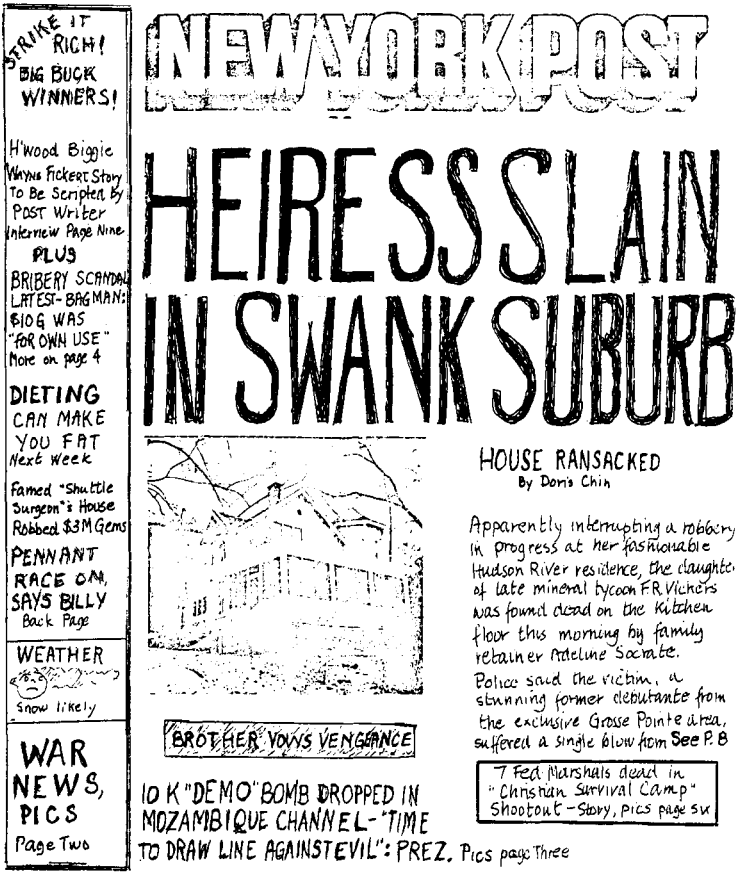
GADDIS

I don't read a great deal of this kind of criticism. When it's applied to me. . . When I'm put in one of these areas, I think, "Well, then *that* is what 'postmodernism' is." But I don't either court it or pursue it or protest. I mean there are fashions—the most extreme, I gather now, being structuralism, deconstruction, what have you, much of which I just read askance. I'm


STRIKE IT RICH! BIG BUCK WINNERS!
H'wood Biggie
Wayne Fickert Story To Be Scripted By POST Writer
Interview Page Nine
PLUS
BRIBERY SCANDAL LATEST- BAGMAN: $10G WAS "FOR OWN USE"
More on page 4
DIETING CAN MAKE YOU FAT
Next week
Famed "Shuttle Surgeon"s House Robbed $3M Gems
PENNANT RACE ON, SAYS BILLY
Back Page
WEATHER
Snow likely
WAR NEWS, PICS
Page Two
NEW YORK POST
HEIRESS SLAIN IN SWANK SUBURB
HOUSE RANSACKED
By Doris Chin
Apparently interrupting a robbery in progress at her fashionable Hudson River residence, the daughter of late mineral tycoon F.R. Vickers was found dead on the kitchen floor this morning by family retainer Adeline Socrate.
Police said the victim, a stunning former debutante from the exclusive Grosse Pointe area, suffered a single blow from See P. 8
BROTHER VOWS VENGEANCE
7 Fed Marshals dead in "Christian Survival Camp" Shootout - Story, Pics page six
10 K "DEMO" BOMB DROPPED IN MOZAMBIQUE CHANNEL - 'TIME TO DRAW LINE AGAINST EVIL': PREZ. Pics page Three

Mr. Gaddis has supplied the following note about the above: "This is an example of one of those 'inspired' moments better abandoned in the sober light of day: a rough sketch for the final resolution of Carpenter's Gothic, *as later elaborated in the book's closing pages. The 'newspaper page' is referred to in the actual book as follows: 'They get the picture and put it all over the front page and make up a story to go with it.' "*

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not sure what is going on, but it's surely not on my mind when I write.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't one of the commonly accepted features of the post-modern that there is a suspension of causation? Is this illustrated in your work?

GADDIS

No, no, there is always a thread of causation, threads, many of them, and on a different level I would say to that that form and content must coalesce, they must reflect each other. So particularly with *JR*, being very largely about a shattered world, about a fragmented world, the style there is fragmentation. So that was a basic early decision: to try to reflect the fragmentation, but to create the fabric threaded with causation of however attenuated or even illogical a sort.

INTERVIEWER

Do you want readers to like what you do?

GADDIS

Heavens yes.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of audience do you think of when you write?

GADDIS

When I write I *don't* think of the audience. After the fact I think, "Well there. I hope they like it."

INTERVIEWER

Somehow it is always emphasized in connection with *The Recognitions* that it is an "underground classic," that it is "for a very small audience." Did you want to break out of this when you wrote more accessible novels? If not, what is it that made your second novel more accessible than the first and the third more accessible than the second?

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GADDIS

That's interesting. *I* think of the first one, *The Recognitions*, as being the most accessible. Much the most. If we get into this terrible word, "accessible," which has been used in many reviews usually with the prefix "in": I should think that because of the demand on the reader to put in a little work, *JR* is the least accessible of the three. The last one, I think, is quite accessible. Although because of the background that the first two created, they're inclined to pursue it in the same way. The daily reviewer for *The New York Times* was relieved because it was short, so I believe he actually read it. Though he reviewed *JR* ten years before, in reviewing *Carpenter's Gothic* he said he had *not* read *JR*, couldn't follow it, too long and complicated. That kind of irresponsibility doesn't cheer a writer up, but, of course, these things are not on my mind when I'm working.

INTERVIEWER

The self-reflexive element is gone from your work at this point.

GADDIS

I want to get rid of it, yes. None of the books has got any interior monologue, easy effects, any of "he wished he could see her that afternoon." I mean he's got to show it, to *tell* someone, "I wish I could see her this afternoon." Authorial absence so that the characters create the situation. I find this much more provocative to me both as a writer when I'm working on it and as a reader. Interestingly, *The Recognitions*, which came out thirty-five years ago, was regarded as quite inaccessible at the time. *Now* I think it is read without much difficulty.

INTERVIEWER

Which is the novel *you* care most for?

GADDIS

I think that I care most for *JR* because I'm awfully fond of the boy himself.

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INTERVIEWER

What are your feelings about the American novel today?

GADDIS

I wouldn't make a great statement on that, but I do think there is a good number of excellent novelists, and then there is the usual . . . the others. But I think—since they say "American novel" in contradistinction to the French, the British, or what have you—we are turning out proportionately much more good fiction in America of all kinds.

INTERVIEWER

What is happening in the novel is happening mostly in America. What, in your view, can the goal of literary workmanship be in the last quarter of the twentieth century?

GADDIS

In Bulgaria, when we were talking at a conference dedicated to peace, the hope of the planet, there were some two hundred writers there from fifty-two countries, discussing what the writer can do for peace. Obviously peace is the issue driving everyone mad, so that most of that conference was sheer and desperate propaganda. I suppose in all three books I constantly try to call attention to what my mother had told me once at some paranoid moment of mine: "You must always remember that there is much more stupidity than there is malice in the world." This is what I talked about in Sofia. This is what we must—if we can't teach it, which we can't—at least call attention to.

INTERVIEWER

Plans?

GADDIS

I have got another novel nicely under way.

INTERVIEWER

This conversation is being conducted in Budapest. Being a

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Hungarian, I am particularly interested in why Hungary, Hungarian literature and language, have a relatively large role to play in *The Recognitions*?

GADDIS

I think because I pictured them—Hungary and Budapest—as mysterious, exciting, highly civilized, sophisticated. But *mysterious*, mainly.

INTERVIEWER

One of the central characters, Valentine, is Hungarian. Why?

GADDIS

I suppose for these reasons, and that he is completely cynical, in that traditional American mistrust of European guile going back, again, to Mark Twain.

INTERVIEWER

Is he purely fictional or is he somebody you knew? I am asking this because he is the one in *The Recognitions* who informs "Willie"—obviously the author, William Gaddis—about Clement's *Recognitions*.

GADDIS

No. He is a totally fictional character.

INTERVIEWER

And the references to Sámuel Brassai, Pázmány, Mikszáth, Bródy, Gárdonyi, Móricz, Molnár? Is there more behind it than the Encyclopaedia Britannica? Even if there is not, why Hungarian literature? Because Valentine and Inononu are Hungarian characters in the novel?

GADDIS

I was trying to make them legitimately characters of this very sophisticated, very cynical, very mysterious world as I viewed it thirty-five years ago.

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INTERVIEWER

Where did you pick up the Hungarian phrases?

GADDIS

Well, I had written those scenes in English because I try to get things right, and so if they are in Hungary, if they're in a Hungarian hospital, obviously they are speaking Hungarian. So I took these passages to a bar in the upper east side of New York, where there is a large Hungarian community, had a drink, and approached the bartender. I told him I had a problem, that I wanted these passages in Hungarian. He called someone over. Finally there must have been ten people around me arguing about exactly the correct accent, the nuance of the phrase. When I had written it all down, he said, "Now, the man who was the leading figure in this conversation, whom everyone else bowed to, as it were, is a great Hungarian actor. If he said you got it right, you know you have it right." And, of course, as it all turned out, when I'd gone up there ready to buy a drink for anyone who would help me, it was they who bought mine.

INTERVIEWER

If there are Hungarian phrases and literary references, why couldn't the two Hungarian characters have Hungarian names?

GADDIS

Valentine, of course, is named after the alchemist, Basil Valentine, who . . .

INTERVIEWER

So there were more important thematic concerns.

GADDIS

Yes, who knows, maybe he changed his name, I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

Did you visit Hungary in the years when you were writing *The Recognitions*?

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GADDIS

I've never been to Hungary until today.

INTERVIEWER

And since you flew in yesterday, it's too early to ask you about the impressions.

GADDIS

What I see of Budapest is splendid. It is everything one has been led to imagine.

—**Zoltán Abádi-Nagy**

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Two Poems by Mark Turpin

Pickwork

There is skill to it, how you hold your back all day, the
dole
of force behind the stroke, the size of bite, where
to hit, and knowing behind each swing a thousand others
wait
in an eight-hour day.

And if the head suddenly comes rattling down the handle:
knowing to drive a nail for a wedge between the wood and
the steel.
The inexperienced pretend to see in the dirt a face they
hate,
and exhaust themselves. The best

measure themselves against an arbitrary goal, *this much*
before lunch, before break, before a drink of water, and
then,
do it. Some listen to the pleasant ringing
of the pick, or music, and trance-like, follow the rhythm

of the swing. Once I spent a half-hour attentive
only to my muscles triggering into motion, sweat
creeping down my chest. Ground makes the biggest
difference.
In sandstone you feel the impact to your knees,

in mud you yank the point from the muck each throw.
The hardest part is not to let the rhythm fail,
like stopping too often to remeasure the depth, stalling
in the shithouse, losing self-respect, or beginning to
doubt:

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Am I cutting too wide? Is the line still straight?
Or thinking of backhoes, more help, quibbling inches
with the boss. On my job Lorenzo works in the sun all day,
his silver radio quietly tuned to the Mexican station.

Shoveling out, he shrugs and says, "No problem, Mark,"
waist-deep in the hole.
From the spot I work, I hear the strike of his pick all day.
Driving home together he has told me about his two black
whores,

his ex and daughter in LA, and Susan Nero "on stage."
Thirteen times
he's seen her. Almost reverent, he says, "She *is* so
beautiful,"
and makes immense cups with his hands.
And driving home he has told me of his landlord who
extorts him

for the green card he doesn't have, of his "mo-ther"
dying of cancer in Mexico City, of his son-of-a-bitch
dad who beat him, and her, and ran away, of his brother
Michael,
and Joaquim, in Chicago, the Central Valley. In the car

he asks me if I think the boss will hold half his pay, he
needs
to save something for his sister
—I hear his pick all day
and in the afternoon I go out to ask him, how's it going?

He shrugs me off. "It's no big problem, Mark.
No problem, I can do it, but the fucking pick is dull,"
and shows me the blunted steel point. "I need
something—
sharper, you know: I need a sharper pick."

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The Box

When I see driven nails I think of the hammer and the
hand,
his mood, the weather, the time of year, what he packed
for lunch, how built up was the house,
the neighborhood, could he see another job from here?

And where was the lumber stacked, in what closet
stood the nail kegs, where did the boss unroll
the plans, which room was chosen for lunch? And where
did the sun strike first? Which wall cut the wind?

What was the picture in his mind as the hammer
hit the nail? A conversation? Another joke, a cigarette
Or Friday, getting drunk, a woman, his wife, his youngest
kid or a side job he planned to make ends meet?

Maybe he pictured just the nail,
the slight swirl in the center of the head and raised
the hammer, and brought it down with fury and with skill
and sank it with a single blow.

Not a difficult trick for a journeyman, no harder
than figuring stairs or a hip-and-valley roof
or staking out a lot, but neither is a house,
a house is just a box fastened with thousands of nails.

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Jeffrey Skinner

Self Portrait

A tiny blemish where the sun-
glasses touch his cheek. It will fade.
From the corner of each eye, uneven notches
flare like the tracings of a split positron;

under each lower lid a thumbprint
smudge, worse on humid days, as now.
The irises still good—kaleidoscopic
chips of cerulean, aqua, liony

gold all float near the pupil on white
seas, all pull to bring the world in clear.
The hair, dark swirls and flourishes
at twenty, envy of older women,

has calmed to gentle swells, though still
thick, holding tight under scalp or skull
the desire to grow again wildly.
The waist will not shrink for self-

love or money. The lips are out of style.
And the blemishes add up, like drops
of rain on a white dust road.
But in his chest the aging circus

goes on wandering, the rings more complex—
one flyer on the verge of a quadruple,
the knifethrower nearly blind, his hand
guided now by outline, now by love only.

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Kevin Jeffery Clarke

Walking Papers

Beautiful beyond belief
to look at you the whole way
would be to walk away maimed
And you know this
You rub your face
with colors worked in earth
to take on the tribal cry
and the shaking
the shaking on, the shaking off,
though otherwise are calm
as the week in Montana
you browsed through
a catalogue of streams
telling me later
things I don't remember
because my life is lately
about forgetting
and because they were spoken
by a man who doesn't believe
it is love moves him
away from the quarrels
with open air
into rooms corseted
with music and a white pitcher
in a white bowl
but inability
so clear its cry
is human to hold you back from us.

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Sharon Olds

The Ferryer

Three years after my father's death
he goes back to work. Unemployed
for 25 years, he's very glad to be
taken on again, shows up
on time, tireless worker. He sits
in the prow of the boat, sweet cox, but not
facing the body of the craft—he has his
back to the carried. He is dead, but able to
kneel upright, facing forward toward the
other shore. Someone has closed his
mouth, so he looks more comfortable, not
thirsty or calling out, and his eyes are
open and under the brown iris is the
brown line that appeared there in death—
earth under earth. He is calm, he is
happy to be hired, he's in business again, his
new job is a joke between us and he
loves to have a joke with me, he keeps a
straight face. He waits, naked,
ivory as a carved figurehead,
ribs, nipples, lips, a gaunt
tall man, and when I bring someone and
set them in the boat and push them off he
simply poles them across the river
to the far bank. We don't speak,
he knows that this is simply someone
I want to get rid of, who makes me feel
small or afraid. I do not say
the way you did. He knows the labor

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and loves it. He stares ahead, and when I
dump someone in, he takes them straight
to hell. He wants to work for me
until I die. Then, he knows, I will
come for him, hold out my broad
hand to his, help him ashore, we'll
embrace like unborn twins, naked,
not breathing, then up to our chins we will
pull the dark blanket of earth and
rest together at the end of the working day.

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Stephen Dunn

Among Men

Yesterday in the locker room
a young man told his friend
how he did it to her
and what she did to him.

He wanted all of us
to hear as if the act weren't complete
until it was repeated among men.
Her diminishment, his power —

one of the old stories.
He and his friend were naked.
They had just played
with a shared ferocity

within four walls, without rancor.
It had been terrific, they kept saying.

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Wendy Wilder Larsen

The Stove

One morning the stove decided not to cook.
The children were startled.
The stove had always cooked—
fires danced inside her
kettles of hot soup shook on her burners
fresh bread heaved from her ovens
hot chocolate signalled morning.
But the stove would not cook.
At first they just stood there.
Then they chopped special wood
polished the chrome skirt under her belly
sang to her all the songs they knew.
But the stove would not cook.
One day the oldest kicked the stove
as hard as he could.
When nothing happened
he left the house for good.
The others seldom went to the kitchen.
When they did, they stared at the stove
walked around it
muttered to each other.
The youngest was the only one
who talked to the stove.
One afternoon she knelt beside it
opened its black door
and asked the ashes, "What has happened?"
She lay on the kitchen floor
until night came.
Her golden hair circled the stove's legs
and turned to bracelets of dust.

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Michael Burkard

A Series of Judgments

Snow is irrational
and the rare song above the snow insane.

Every tree is a personality:
each ticks in the night like a human clock.

It is as uncomfortable to own more than one clock
as it is to own one's name.

Why haven't more tellers robbed banks?
How come there are so many banks?

My brother passes judgment upon me
in dreams he has. One involved a bank.

I know that more than one question is being asked in
the city
in the deep middle of the night. I never hear the questions

but they are out there being asked.
A question's only secret is to ask.

When I kissed him I was trying to take the whole thing
back.
I knew it was time to leave when the dream kissed me:

the past is no longer damaged goods. The night sky is
bright with its own dark.
The train you and I have heard

is our train. That is our secret.
A secret we share but a secret nevertheless.

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Robert Pinsky

Picture

Three men on scaffolding scatter corn flakes down
For people to see in black-and-white as snow,
Falling around the actor under the lights.

The actor hunches in the flakes, the set
Is a bitter street, the camera dollies in
And the monster stamps and sorrows, now he's lost,

He shakes his arms and howls, an ugly baby,
Nostrils forced open by little makeup springs.
The dust of corn flakes, trampled underfoot,

Infiltrates his lungs, he starts to wheeze
And so they take a break and start again.
Weeks later, he dies of pneumonia, maybe by chance—

But the picture is finished, people see the scene
And if they know, they feel the extra pathos,
Even if they joke a little about it. The movie

Is silent, corn flakes are a kind of health food,
It's all that long ago, although the picture
Survives as flecks of light and dark on substances

Not invented when they made it—or a play
Of information, a magnetic mist
Of charges, particles too fine to see.

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Jennifer Martin

Sunday Painting

The world is not aweather
for that moment. My brother
is painting a Sunday picture
of a Jew alive
in a stand of primrose.
The background is lavender,
a cash crop in Provence.
Imagine, he says,
selling flowers.
I look up to where his sky
is weighted by a cloud.
In springtime
we belong to nothing.
(The Jew is already
shrinking to the size
of a dot.) Look! he says
and paints the moon in heavily
and a beautiful white chicken
to squawk.
This is a scar he says of the horizon.
This is twilight.

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David Lehman

Four Versions of the End

1.

The stars have gone north, abandoning the city
For this wilderness that is mine, if only for a time,
Long enough to learn the language of the leaves before
It's time to return, like an unwilling prophet,
To warn the others of the danger they face
And there's nothing they can do about it, except listen.

2.

Is it enough to have survived the crash,
To escape the burning car and run,
With the confidence of a sleepwalker, along
The border between two foreign states of mind
And not look back, lest we freeze into statues
Of ourselves, awed by the devastation behind us?

3.

Some regard the castle as a crossword puzzle of bricks,
But the forest beckons, babbling the language of brooks,
And there's nothing we can do about it, except listen
And wait, until it's too late, until
The world is everything that is the fall:
All roads lead to the same supreme heartbreak.

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4.

On the abandoned airfield, you can almost hear
The silence getting louder, coming nearer,
Speeding by and then, with a whine like the smear
Of a siren, diminishing in pitch as it fades
Into one man's past, which is another man's future,
And there's nothing you can do about it, except listen.

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Cynthia Zarin

Saturn

The father of two silver medal figure skaters
said, "When they were eight and ten, I built a rink,
twenty
by forty in the yard, without a fence. There was nothing
for them to hold on to . . . knew they were stars right
away."
At night, off Central Park, the Planetarium turns

up its closed, calcified, tyrannosaurus eye to
something other, not heraldic heaven, where Saturn,
lonely (we think), anthemless, has rings of whizzing ice
that just last week astronomers thought were wider. But
some
are only ten feet thick. Not much more than a stellar

roller-coaster, elliptical iris, hypnotic
bulls-eye of the midnight sci-fi. In another lake
of dark, on a sweaty acre of black-topped tarmac
hunched too close to the railroad tracks, the best-loved
child
of Class 3-B could fend two iridescent hula

hoops, on her birdy hips. I scorned her as a plain girl
scorns a beauty queen. Pink and green, the double helix
turned her to a dervish. A scant mile from the museum,

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the starry bulbs at Tavern on the Green turn the bare trees to hawthorns in full flower. Seeing hawthorns, Proust thought: *ball gowns*. What happened to the hoop girl?

The skaters won. Up above were Saturn's rings, no bigger than back alleys. Not much to hold in your mind, and not something Saturn—as it makes its monstrous, dogged, entirely involuntary astral circle—may know about.

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from Acts of Faith

Hans Koning

Balthasar Bekker, a seventeenth-century Dutch parson, wrote a book called *The World Bewitched*, in which he inveighed against the burning of heretics and witches. In fact, he dared suggest there were no witches and there was no devil. These wild ideas were published in Amsterdam in 1691 and made Bekker famous; they also promptly lost him his church.

A descendant of the parson, Jan Balthasar Bekker, he too a religious rebel, emigrated from Holland to the United States in a group of Protestant dissidents led by a Reverend Scholte. In 1847 these people founded the town of Pella in Iowa.

To this Bekker the bitter church arguments about the true nature of the Trinity lost their acuteness in the limitless landscape of Iowa. The complacent egocentricity of the church elders seemed to evaporate between those endless fields and that vast sky, harsh blue in summer, gray so many days the rest of the year.

One early Sunday morning, when Bekker had wandered far from town, he came upon a strange wagon train. Mules and oxen were pulling decrepit broken-down wagons, followed by men, women, and children on foot. Women were carrying

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small children who were clearly dead. It was a silent caravan and when they passed him, they all looked away. These people, he learned later that day, made up the remnants of the Sauk and Fox Indian tribes, expelled from their land. Bekker did not attend Reverend Scholte's Sunday vespers. On Wednesday of that week he left the church and Pella to go east. He dropped the "Bekker" from his name and called himself Jan Balthasar. He was John Balthasar's great-grandfather.

John Balthasar owned a diary of his. It was incomplete and hard to decipher with its cramped handwriting and scattering of Dutch words, but he understood that his great-grandfather had changed his name in protest, detaching himself from the past in a way or proclaiming himself a new man, and he had liked him for it. Beyond that, he had never felt much interest in his family history.

Now he started thinking about the book written by that ancestor of his. The world bewitched.

Perhaps it had a special meaning for him. Perhaps old Bekker would like him to take that family name back. The seventeenth century, the century of Descartes, of clear logic, when thought was pure but not without humility, ideas to blow away the sickening chimeras of the present.

You exaggerate again, he said to himself, but couldn't stop believing that book might help him.

The library catalogue listed an English-language copy of *The World Bewitched* and he filed an application slip for it, but it came back marked, "Missing from shelf." Oh well. See.

That evening after work he took the subway to 110th Street and located the church of Father Guillermo Martinez.

The priest opened the door to the rectory himself. He did not look surprised to see Balthasar, but he did not seem pleased either. They sat down in a dark front room looking out on a street noisy with double-parked cars and Balthasar said, "I'm sorry to show up here like this without calling, but . . ."

"I'm always ready for someone in distress," Martinez answered.

The word startled Balthasar. "Distress? Well, no—You see, I had been waiting for a certain book and when it did not

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come . . . Anyway, there are just a few questions I must ask you; they're about auto-da-fés. Or is it autos-da-fé?"

Martinez stared at him. "Autos-da-fé, I presume. It's Portuguese, you know. In Spanish it would be *de*, not *da*."

"Oh."

"Auto-da-fé, an act of faith. Or perhaps better, an act of The Faith. With a capital F."

"The one and only."

"Yes," Martinez said.

"The Portuguese must have invented it then."

"I really wouldn't know."

"I was waiting for a book this afternoon that might have helped me," Balthasar said. "You know I work at the public library, don't you? Anyway, I then started to read about this in the encyclopedias we've got. I know now that the heretics were brought out in yellow robes with flames painted on them, those going to the stake. And the bellows for the unconfessed—the executioner had a pair of bellows with long handles and he blew the smoke away from their faces, to make sure they stayed conscious as long as possible, did you know all that?"

Martinez had several times tried to interrupt and now he held up his hand in protest. "Why are you occupying yourself with this morbid subject?" he asked in a hostile voice.

Balthasar was about to answer, "And here I have told you how I witnessed one," but checked himself in time. That was in a dream. And then in another dream. He shook his head. "It's, it's part of church history, isn't it?"

"And why do you come to me with this?"

Balthasar smiled. "You see, I had a dream in which you yourself were about to explain to me the use of the bellows at an execution."

"A dream?" The priest did not smile back. "I had never heard of all this, all these details. May I confess, I am not attracted by theology and even less by its history. I see the Church as a moral agent."

"Well, tell me then, has your church ever retroactively expressed its remorse over those deaths by fire?"

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"Actually—But you tell me first, are you attracted to the Catholic faith?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

"If you are," the priest said, "you and I may have many talks. If you are not, I see no point in pursuing these obscure historical details with an outsider."

* * *

It was raining outside. At the corner the wind from the Hudson blew up his raincoat and a sudden burst of rain drenched his knees. Dammit.

Exsurge Domine et judica causam tuam. The words on the seal under which people were burned to death.

I must try and understand what being burned to death means, what being tortured means. That is what sets mankind apart, not their thinking. Homo Sapiens, shit. Homo Torquens, if that is Latin.

You sit in your cell. They appear with that horrendous yellow robe with the flames on it. As if for a game played by insane children.

Why put it on? I will resist, tear it to shreds. Why did those men and women wear them and walk in procession as if they accepted the rules of this unnatural game?

I will not act that way, I will not do anything to help give sense and order to this chaos. Men will have to hold me down as they put the robe on me. They'll have to tie my hands while I spit in their faces. They'll be muttering prayers all the while, shivering when they touch my skin in anticipatory sadism, appearing to them as godly fervor.

Off to the field of the auto-da-fé, the hot and dusty town square or Huelca. Pilgrims watching, tourists watching from hotel windows, yellow German tour buses, *Auto-da-fé Reise*. The timelessness while the executioner binds the other heretics, timelessness because it is only seconds and yet endless time, from the moment he drops his torch into the kindling until I feel the heat of the little flames. Then the total fear and the total pain filling me. But pain remains a mystery to me.

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I do not grasp why we cannot turn it off, why we cannot refuse its signals.

He arrived home wet through and his teeth were chattering. He dropped his clothes on the bathroom floor and crept into bed. But he got up again and went to get the box of kitchen matches.

He sat up in bed, lit a match, and moved his left hand toward it. Warmth, finally pain. A small pain which showed its potency, its inherent character of becoming huge.

He tried a second time. I am too cowardly to do this as it must be done. But why, why pain in my hand, since all emotions spring from my brain? Then, unintentionally, he had let the match burn down to his fingers. He held on until he had to drop it with a smothered cry. There is a secret here, of fakirs, Apaches used to have it. We better all study it, and now. But he felt foolish. He held his burned fingers under the tap, put away the matches, and turned the hole which had been burned in the sheet.

When Diana got home he told her he had caught a cold. He was shivering and she put an extra blanket on the bed.

"Diana, I got a little book from England on my desk today, it's called *Gentleman's Recreation*, seventeenth century. You know the sporting hint for training young bloodhounds? You catch a deer in a net, then you cut off its left forefoot and set it free, and have the hounds catch it."

She shivered.

"You'll say, that was long ago. But the 1983 American deer hunters manual has this, 'If the bullet goes through the animal, so much the better. It will leave a good blood trail to follow.'"

She shook her head. "Stop it."

"In a way it cheers me up," he said. "It makes me think, we deserve all that's coming to us."

* * *

There had been a sign on a notice board at St. Joseph's, the

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church where they were married, "Confessions—Saturdays 4 P.M." He went there.

The church appeared empty. He wandered up the aisle, not knowing how to go about this. Someone pulled at his sleeve. Two old ladies were sitting there, next to each other, dressed in black both. Submerged in the dim light. The one who had stopped him pointed at a little red lamp over a door beside the altar. He nodded and sat down too.

It became a long wait. The ladies took their time. Repeatedly he decided to leave. He knew before setting out that this was an unreasoned enterprise; even so he felt it was something he must try, or rather, have tried. He wasn't certain about what he was going to say.

Now he was alone waiting in the dark hall. The green light above the door went on. The second woman shuffled out without looking at him.

He opened the door to a cubicle without a chair; a wooden step became visible and he kneeled on it. Through a wooden screen he saw a light shining on the priest, a young man. The priest turned off this light.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," Balthasar said, the peculiar statement which Diana had assured him was custom.

The priest asked him when he had last been to confession. He had a pleasant voice, an Irish accent.

"Oh, a long a time, a very long time," Balthasar muttered.

There was a pause. "Yes, my son?" the priest said.

Balthasar took a deep breath. He tried to shift his position; the wood hurt his knees badly. He could feel his heart beat very fast. Let me think sharply now.

"This confession is to a responsibility," he said. "The responsibility for death through fire."

He heard something like a cough or gulp from behind the screen. Yes Father, I have something different for you from gossip or jealousy of the neighbors.

"Whose death?" the priest asked in a hoarse voice.

"Many. Many deaths. Slow deaths, of men and women burned alive."

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The priest cleared his throat again. "You have come here with a clear head and in full command of your senses?"

"Yes, Father."

"Very well. Continue."

"That is all I have to say. What I must know is this, is there forgiveness for such a crime?"

Another pause, then the priest said slowly, "We are taught that to God no crime is too great to be forgiven, if there is true contrition, and penance."

"No crime is too great to be absolved by you?"

"The Church knows reserved sins, so-called." The priest's voice was wary now. "Those I cannot absolve, they must be heard by the Bishop. However, that is for later." He seemed to hesitate and then asked, "My son, are you an arsonist?"

Balthasar almost smiled in the dark. The pain in his knees had become hard to bear; he half stood up, then kneeled again.

"No," he answered. And then he said, "I am not speaking for myself."

"You cannot confess to the sin of another man. We are taught that confession must be auricular and private."

"The high priest confesses to the sins of others on the Jewish Day of Atonement."

"Did you come here now in a spirit of seriousness?" the priest asked. He sounded relieved, and very Irish.

"I did."

"Well then. You're not a high priest, are you, and we're not Jewish. You talk of a terrible crime. If you really know about such a crime, you must try and have its author come to me himself. But I can't discuss this any further here, this is not the place. Do you understand what I told you?"

"I was not speaking of arson," Balthasar said. "I was speaking of execution through fire. And the author of this is you yourself, your church. I am asking you to absolve your own church."

He could hear the priest catch his breath. The man seemed about to speak but did not; a door opened and closed; the priest had left the confessional.

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Balthasar felt himself redden. It was as if he was suddenly coming to his senses. What am I doing, he thought. He got up with difficulty and looked around the door. He saw no one. He well-nigh ran out of the church and breathed a slow sigh of relief when he had turned the corner.

It was the end of a lovely spring day. The light, after the gloom inside, was dazzling.

That feeling of relief stayed with him on his bus ride uptown. As he got off at his stop, he saw Diana come out of a store and walk toward their building; he hurried to catch up with her.

"Do you know this is the first time ever we've met in the street, you and I?" he asked.

"But we're half a block from home, it's less than a miracle."

"Never mind, it's nice, it means getting the better of this town. Let's not go in yet, let's go sit on that new terrace around the corner."

She hesitated.

"Come on, it's a rare evening, not too cold and not too hot."

"All right then, if we sit back from the traffic. I can't sit in the car fumes."

She ordered orange juice for herself. "I know I'm a terrible drag," she suddenly announced. "I don't recognize myself."

"Well, it's a long haul."

She looked around her, at the people at other tables, the passers-by, two cab drivers talking to each other at the light until a car behind them started to honk. "It isn't even that. I'm in good shape. It's the idea that this city is so threatening, it's threatening the poor thing. I don't feel safe. Maybe in my office, and at home in my bedroom. I know it's crazy."

Your baby is threatened. We are threatened. "It's okay," he said, "It'll all be okay. It'll all come out in the wash."

She smiled now. "That dates you, that expression."

"I don't mind. I am a wise old man."

"Yes, it will be all right, won't it?" she asked.

"Absolutely."

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"But it hasn't been fair to you. You thought you were marrying a fashionable chick, didn't you?"

"Guess where I came from just now. Confession."

"John. No kidding. Are you coming over to us? But what did they say? And what did you confess, heh?"

"That's a secret, isn't it, between me and the priest."

"I was just joking."

"I know. I'll tell you some day. It wasn't what you think. But the point is, I can see how it makes you feel nice. I know there's no reality to it, I think there isn't, I mean God doesn't enter into it, but it makes you feel good. Just as something between two people. Even in my case."

"Why 'even'? Didn't he give you absolution?"

"I didn't ask for it, not like that."

"Oh . . ." She was puzzled. "Where did you go? Shall I tell mother? She'd be pleased."

"Well, she may get the wrong idea—I went to our wedding church in the Village. I remembered their sign. Not the same priest, a young Irishman. Are you cold? Shall we go home now?"

"No, I'm okay, it's nice here, I'm glad you made us do this. John—you're okay now, aren't you? You're not brooding too much any more, are you?"

"No, I'm okay."

"You still have nightmares, don't you?"

"No, not really. I take my pills."

"Sometimes when I'm awake, I hear you moan and groan."

"Oh God really? Just give me a kick. Honestly. Do. You know what's so pleasing about this confession business, it's so old-fashioned. Like house calls. Isn't it odd they are doing it still? And for free? I bet you they'll switch to tapes soon, or some kind of video hook-up." As he spoke, he realized that the sensation, of a burden having been lifted, had gone. Those hours in St. Joseph's Church were becoming blurred; soon they'd sink away.

"When this is over," he said, "when the baby is born, perhaps we should go away, not vacation I mean, just go, to some place I don't know where."

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"We'd have a hard time finding another apartment."

"Yes, that's true of course."

She had a little smile and took hold of his hand. "I know that's not what you meant. You must find your peace right here, you know, with me. With us. Here, feel." And she put his hand on her belly.

* * *

He remembers the peculiar, special warmth of days in southern France. The sharp smell in the air of sun on pine trees. Of fires. These smells and that warmth on his skin come to him before he sees anything.

He is in a squat tower then, looking out through iron bars at a sun-drenched green landscape; the tower is part of a city wall. But knowing he is again in a dream, it is easy to free himself, to sit in judgment instead.

Will he really judge those people to death, have them handed over to the stubbly, sweaty soldiers? That child, isn't she at least too young? No, she's eight. She has reached the age of reason. A soldier drinks, spits.

There is little sound, it is a very hot day, nothing stirs. In this sharp sunlight the fires will be almost invisible. There will be much dark smoke and the ashes will rise and rise.

But all this is better than doubt, they say.

But as he watches over this field of stakes with men, women, and children burning on them, like an orchard of dying mannikins, the sirens start. Their long drawn-out up and down wail fills the streets, covers the field, rises up to the hills around the city. The gleaming missiles appear.

He wakes up. He feels himself filled with hopelessness, with an idea of this-cannot-be. He moves up to Diana, he presses his head against her shoulder, and he cries.

She doesn't completely wake up, she strokes his hair with her right hand. "Sh, sh," she whispers.

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Four Poems by Milo De Angelis

"A.S."

I

All of you no doubt have felt
the soft sleep, the sweetest dizziness
easing you down on the bed
and then the tree, the bark, the algae,
the eyes don't turn away
and the vials are no longer theatening
in the chiaroscuro of the afternoon
as a thousand animals
surround the stretcher, block the nurses
the labored breathing becoming more and more shallow
in the frosted windows
of the ambulance, the windowsill of a floor
appears, the interval
that releases the living
and makes them race with the current in the pupils,
sparkling at the moment of the offer.
And suddenly, the quiet
of the vineyard and the well, the smooth stone
tearing the flesh
a calm deep within the grain
as the woman on the field gives birth
more and more slowly,
until the son returns in the fecundation
and earlier still, in the kiss, in the glimmer
of a room, the large mirror,
growing desire, the gesture.

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II

And then you have also felt, at least once
when the liquid issues most delicately
from the lips, flows yellow in the washbasin
the probe and the sirens ever more distant.
The breathing subsides, stops, resumes
how peaceful is the beach frozen by the storm:
a canoe drifts toward a coral island
and beneath the sea sexual cells couple
there are no irreparable events
only the cyclic sponges, the insects
that blanket the air:
look, mother-of-pearl, a rock in the sand,
footprints, look, manna,
the bathrobe he removes with a single gesture
the solemnity of the light, the wonder, the first
and the female pelican
calls the brood scattered in the storm
and perhaps sees something, among the reefs,
something that moves
tomorrow she will run with her children,
mingled among them, as they go to breathe
in the deep turquoise of the tide
rising to the surface, reviving now
and finding a different land, another voice.

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Now she is unadorned

Now she is unadorned
and the years come to pass, in handfuls,
with the wit of shears and
an arrogance that draws
to the gas the mouth
hard down to the spine
where it believes
or else the dead trudge toward
a field
that has a hollow head
and the myriads
hurl themselves into the baptism
for a breath.

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Letter from Vignole

We heard the rain and those
who were returning: each thing
in the calm of speaking
and then the mountain, an instant, and all
the dead whom not even your exile
can distinguish.

"Come back at once or don't ever come back."

This—amid the psalms
of the law—was the voice
that you repeated at the beginning,
the potent syllable, before
you yourself.

"Only then shall I come to meet you, unaware
in the winter which I lost and find."

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In the Lungs

The blanket, its weight, while we were growing.
Or the eyes, which yesterday were blind,
today yours, yesterday the indivisible. The vials,
the laughter in white becomes the only
world without symbol. Matter that
was only matter, nothing that
was only matter. Watch, don't watch, poetry,
cobalt, father, nothing, poplars.

—translated from the Italian
by Lawrence Venuti

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Portfolio

Modus Operandi

Joseph Kosuth

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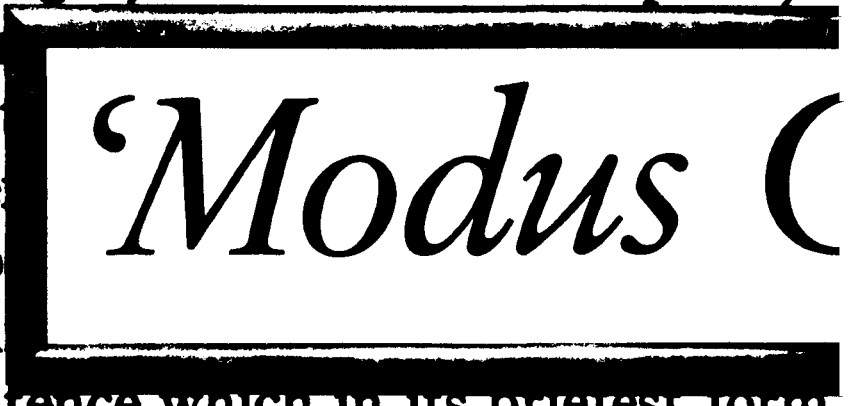

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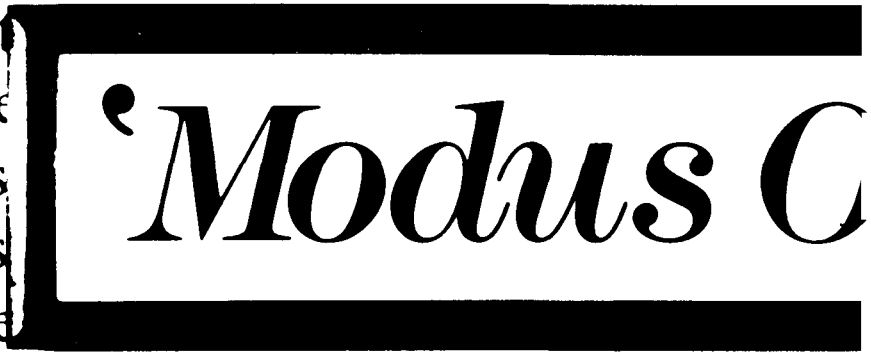

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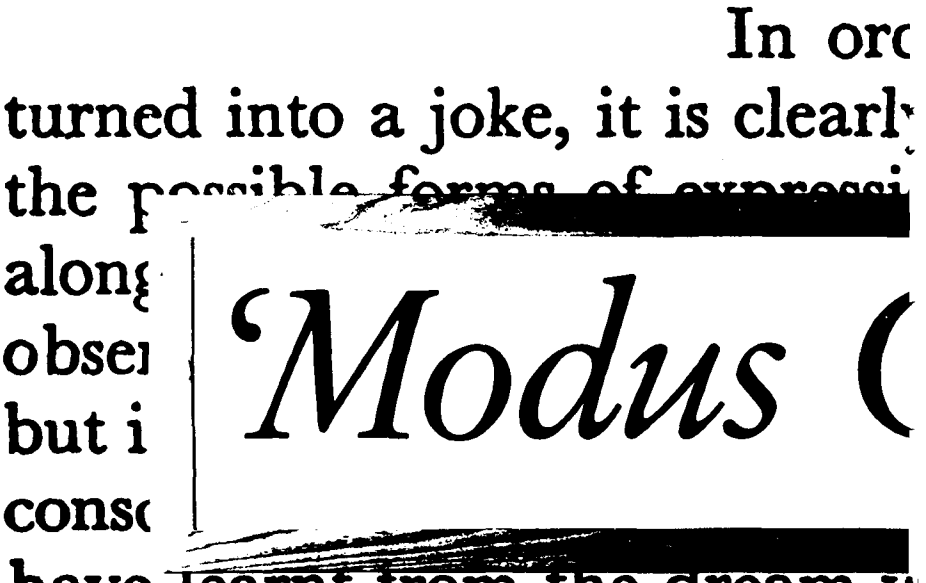

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Captain Ahab: A Novel by the White Whale

Paul West

I too, alone, survived to tell thee. A whale tells this, white as Biscay froth, a tale black as caviar. I almost lost heart. Albinos do, doomed special while feeling like the rest. We're dark unto ourselves. *We*? I am the only one. I have never bred. I have never seen a white male or a white mate. I never had company save for him. Only, during brief heaven, a mother who nudged and nourished. Shunned, I go from ocean to ocean, falling in love with icebergs and fluffy fog, and, nearer shore, with snow and polar bears. I am forbidden nothing, but there is nothing I can have. What sex am I? Did Ahab know?

Squinting aft, I see him, rib cage and all. As the years went by, he began to rattle, then to chime. I read his last will and testament from his lips, then took him down for the count, poor piscuniak of a mariner. Then I whale-hummed at him, just to be friendly. I wanted somehow to swing him loose, then pop him down, minnow-small and feather-frail. Install him on the bulby mound of one vast kidney according to Jonah Law. A pet, a familiar, a love.

But dislodge him I could not, and I soon knew his coming for what it was: a test in the form of a sign, a sign in the form of a test. Could I brook his presence without wanting friendship? Ahab was my birthmark. Yes. "Ishmael, art thou sleeping there below?" Then answer would come: "Moby, I am thine, for ever."

It was all hopeless. Call me, I began, but my still-thundering jelly of a heart floated upward through my mouth, jump-a-thump, and all that's left is an infolded compass-rose, miming its thanks, murmuring a dew.

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Octavio Paz

Letter of Testimony Cantata

1

There is an uncertain territory
between night and day.
It is neither light nor shadow:
                it is time.
An hour, a precarious pause,
a darkening page,
a page where I write,
slowly, these words.
                The afternoon
is an ember burning itself out.
The day turns, its leaves dropping.
A dark river files away
                at the edges
of things.
        Tranquil, persistent,
it drags them along, I don't know where.
Reality drifts off.
                I write:
I talk to myself
                —I talk to you.

I wanted to talk to you
as the air and this small tree talk
to each other,
                nearly erased by the shadows;
like running water,
the murmur of an incessant stream;
like a still puddle,
that reflector of instantaneous shams;

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like fire:
with tongues of flame, a dance of sparks,
tales of smoke.

To talk to you
with visible and palpable words,
words with weight, flavor and smell,
like things.
While I speak,
things imperceptibly
shake loose from themselves,
escaping toward other forms,
other names.
They leave me these words:
with them I talk to you.

Words are bridges.
And they are traps, jails, wells.
I talk to you: you do not hear me.
I don't talk with you:
I talk with a word.
That word is you,
that word
carries you from yourself to yourself.
You, I, and fate created it.
The woman that you are
is the woman to whom I speak:
these words are your mirror,
you are yourself and the echo of your name.
I too,
talking to you,
turn into a whisper,
air and words, a puff,
a ghost that rises from these letters.

Words are bridges:
the shadow of the hills of Meknes
over a field of static sunflowers

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is a violet bay.
It is three in the afternoon,

you are nine years old and asleep
in the cool arms of a pale mimosa.
In love with geometry
a hawk draws a circle.
The soft copper of the mountains
trembles on the horizon.
The white cubes of a village
in the dizzying cliffs.
A column of smoke rises from the plain
and slowly scatters, air into the air,
like the song of the muezzin
that drills through the silence,
ascends and flowers
in another silence.
Motionless sun,
the enormous space of spread wings;
over the flat stretches of reflections
thirst raises transparent minarets.
You are neither asleep nor awake:
you float in a time without hours.
A breeze barely stirs
the distant lands of mint and fountains.
Let yourself be carried by these words
toward yourself.

2

Words are uncertain
and speak uncertain things.
But speaking this or that,
they speak us.
Love is an equivocal word,
like all words.
It is not a word,

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said the Founder:
it is a vision,
base and crown

of the ladder of contemplation
—and for the Florentine:
it is an accident
—and for the other:
it is no virtue
but it is born of that which is perfection
—and for the others:
a fever, an aching,
a struggle, a fury, a stupor,
a fancy.
Desire invents it,
mortifications and deprivations give it life,
jealousy spurs it on,
custom kills it.
A gift,
a sentence.
Rage, holiness.
It is a knot: life and death.
A wound
that is the rose of resurrection.
It is a word:
speaking it, we speak ourselves.

Love begins in the body
—where does it end?
If it is a ghost,
it is made flesh in a body:
if it is a body,
it vanishes at a touch.
Fatal mirror:
the desired image disappears,
you drown in your own reflections.
A shades' banquet.

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Apparition:
the moment has eyes and a body,

it watches me.
In the end life has a face and a name.
To love:
to create a body from a soul,
to create a soul from a body,
to create a you from a presence.
To love:
to open the forbidden door,
the passageway
that takes us to the other side of time.
The moment:
the opposite of death,
our fragile eternity.

To love is to lose oneself in time,
to be a mirror among mirrors.
It is idolatry:
to deify a creature
and to call eternal that which is worldly.
All of the forms of flesh
are daughters of time,
travesties.
Time is evil,
the moment
is the Fall;
to love is to hurl down:
interminably falling,
the coupled we
is our abyss.
The caress:
hieroglyph of destruction.
Lust: the mask of death.

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To love: a permutation,
barely an instant
in the history of primogenial cells

and their innumerable divisions.
Axis
of the rotation of the generations.
Invention, transfiguration:
the girl turns into a fountain,
her hair becomes a constellation,
a woman asleep an island.
Blood:
music in the branches of the veins,
touch:
light in the night of the bodies.
Transgression
of nature's fatality,
hinge
that links freedom and fate,
question
engraved on the forehead of desire:
accident or predestination?

Memory, a scar:
—from where were we ripped out?
a scar,
memory, the thirst for presence,
an attachment
to the lost half.
The One
is the prisoner of itself,
it is,
it only is,
it has no memory,
it has no scars:
to love is two,

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always two,
embrace and struggle,
two is the longing to be one,

and to be the other, male or female,
two knows no rest,
it is never complete,
it whirls
around its own shadow,
searching
for what we lost at birth,
the scar opens:
fountain of visions,
two: arch over the void,
bridge of vertigoes,
two:
mirror of mutations.

3

Love, timeless island,
island surrounded by time,
clarity
besieged by night.
To fall
is to return,
to fall is to rise.
To live is to have eyes in one's fingertips,
to touch the knot tied
by stillness and motion.
The art of love
—is it the art of dying?
To love
is to die and live again and die again:
it is liveliness.
I love you

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because I am mortal
and you are.
Pleasure wounds,
the wound flowers.
In the garden of caresses
I clipped the flower of blood

to adorn your hair.
The flower became a word.
The word burns in my memory.
Love:
reconciliation with the Great All
and with the others,
the small and endless
all.
To return to the day of origin.
The day that is today.

The afternoon founders.
Lamps and headlights
drill through the night.
I write:
I talk to you:
I talk to me.
With words of water, fire, air and earth
we invent the garden of glances.
Miranda and Ferdinand gaze forever
into each other's eyes
until they turn to stone.
A way of dying
like others.
High above
the constellations always write
the same word;
we,
here below, write
our mortal names.

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The couple
is a couple because it has no Eden.
We are exiles from the Garden,
we are condemned to invent it,
to nurture our delirious flowers,
living jewels we clip
to adorn a throat.
We are condemned
to leave the Garden behind:
before us
is the world.

Coda

Perhaps to love is to learn
to walk through this world.
To learn to be silent
like the oak and the linden of the fable.
To learn to see.
Your glance scatters seeds.
It planted a tree.
I talk
because you shake its leaves.

—translated from the Spanish
by Eliot Weinberger

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Jordan Smith

Alberich

But in the stippled, rose velvet
Buds of staghorn sumac, in rust-
  Bright veins of briar,
Was god's hand turned against him,
  Was a god's hatred

Drove him, voiceless, down
Among sharptongued reeds by the stream,
  His misshape
Darting there, trebled in the current's
  Shiftings, a swimmer

And her two sisters, who mocked him.
Where, I thought to cry, but could not,
  So I may give praise
Rightly, is the greater craftsman
  Who has made beauty

At such remove that my desire
Is coarsened, a love of form, illumined
  In that shimmering
As theft, and I am driven down
  With Alberich,

Squat, sputtering in the foam,
While about him the scattered glare
  Gathers, a drift
Of river-mottled gold. Poor handiwork,
  He thrashed the shallows,

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As the swimmers chanted, spray
At the bounds of his reflection.
  Bitter, renouncing
Such fellowship, I walked out at dawn
  Where all night

Rain had fallen, freezing on the snow,
And as wind struck the orchard,
  Laughter rose
Around me among the dying branches,
  Glitterings of shape

Flown. Dazzled, slipping,
I grasped for balance an apple bough,
  Which splintered, unequal
To loveliness, to sympathy, diminished
  And so my equal.

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Arthur Vogelsang

Never Ask for Advice

A soft, motiveless conversation that might never end
In a country of size, so beautiful days did not finger each ear.
Near one end grackles, the birds in armor,
Came to a nest to take
Some dove into the soil.
On the other side, silver wings turned in the fog
To a hot wind as they should and were lifted better
(As arms flap a sheet to rise in the morning).
A country of such size that at any moment everything was being done.
The conversation continued endlessly and as they came to understand this
They thought of swooning, had never done it,
But would not. Ram the bird ripped the nest.
The miraculous fool danced on a wing in the rain.
Hit, hit the earth.
I love that wind to dry my mouth.
Someone is even drinking water in Philadelphia from a little glass
As I in my valley with my big glass to outlast the conversation
And you in your cap moaning for New York
And you in your gown
Put the phone down and get out on the plane.

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Bruce Smith

In the City of Brotherly Love

We were tuned like two crystal sets to the race stations
where we heard the saxophones of the Black Zion.

In the dark we crossed the borders of the Caucasus
then got back with the news of the Black Jesus

and the *please, please, please* and the standard mama-jama
alto badness we received from WHAT in Philadelphia.

It makes my liver quiver, the disc jockey said.
It made us glow like vacuum tubes in bed

in our adjoining rooms where we intercepted notes
intended for
the divinely affirmed Nat Turner and the others

and formed a wall between the bedrooms from that
blackness
that was everything misunderstood and other and us.

You talked to John Brown in your pillow.
I thrashed at night to disguise the throes

of the epileptic Vesey, misnamed Denmark, who came
into our neighborhood the way we pulled in the
misaimed,

escaping signals from the Carolinas, a whistle-stop
along the underground be-bop, doo-wop

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railroad that ran from Lightnin' Hopkins
to some mutant albino and might have been some
Scandinavian

country from our whiteness and for all our parents knew.
What is that stuff you're listening to?

I heard something didn't you? in the grooves
of the barely amplified and monophonic rhythm and blues.

I heard a gunshot in my sleep one night, I thought,
after watching the white collegiate workers for civil rights

on television, CORE volunteers in t-shirts like ours
and glasses and hair like Eisenhower's.

I looked for a hole in the wall
above my bed as if it was the braille

of a language whose one cipher, word, sentence
and exclamation point was the evidence

that we could be martyrs if we couldn't be brothers
the way Schwerner, Goodman, and Cheney were.

Someone could see our true colors.
Someone knew we were the thin-lipped conductors.

I went on looking for the vein of the bullet
boring toward you, but I found nothing. That night

I slept under its injunction, but I did not dream.
It was the end of dreams

and the beginning of the separation
of state from whatever transubstantiation

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happened. I wasn't sure we were
related to anyone and whether it was Little Stevie Wonder

or Toussaint L'Ouverture. That was the end of the slave
trade
when I found no wound the bullet made

and I was sure. I swore I saw the blood
run down the walls, didn't you? And I cupped

it in my hands and watched it soak the bed clothes
and the floor and watched it fill my shoes and overflow.

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Two Poems by Tomaz Salamun

Pont-Neuf

You are my flower, my lips, my heaven.
Embrace in your glance the seven grains.
I bear them, until I collapse.
Until another scent pervades the stairway.

My heartbeat, my breath, my grass.
The tenderest felon, red satin.
The window of the labyrinth will crumble you. My palm
picks you up, systematically, like glass does color.

We live for murder. Putrid fruit washed up by The Seine.
And when I lean you up against the wall and look
around, to
see if someone's coming, you turn to crystal.
My traitor, prolonging my life.

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Lips

Steely forehead. Steely forehead.
When the sun comes up, you'll have it quenched.
You feed with me among the sky's black chains.
The wasp and lamb are blue.
Crystalline the flame.

Steely forehead. Steely forehead.
You are alloyed and whiter than the dawn.
Beneath those eyelids my
climbing parties have perished,
my heartbeat stopped for ever.

I've breathed you in, so as
not to hurt you.
So that, as I carry you
across the chasms,
I shriek you into the void.

Flame and flesh,
you are a phantom, the black rose.
You saw yourself, before you burned,
taut in the bow.
Your heaven is a tree bark.

—translated from Slovene
by Michael Biggins

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Bruce Andrews

Could Darwin Instruct Those Turtles?

Could Darwin instruct those turtles? Pixilated pin-dick tax taste—comforting mannikins
atmosphere, he also enjoys an occasional highball: wanna see my meat? Raise rabbits to be U.S. senators, pemex peculation look for reindeer bearing gifts & Christian nail-marks sponsoring the spies. Put my meat away, it's exposed; I've been given the runway immuno-suppressive watchdog epicenter of falsehood—
it's been a compulsive *learner*; it hasn't been a compulsive *thinker*. Home is where the culture is, your materialist life is a science formica potato semen sermon drawbacks
spine elastic is just a great concept—fly blood across the ocean— anything having to do with literature smacks of crime.

See details inside—work to coax trade off
exploded faith, it's going to be engendered throughout the immaterial atmosphere. These prisoners are presented here, flat against the page, as if they were separated entirely from those who observe them. Help exhaust blockbust Australia—blondes have more underwear. See, that's the thing, lift her flap, tarpaulin-sized enigma . . .
mistaken opera identity . . . did the artifacts know about take-out chicken? Glee Club swells the member
it's pronounced spoot-nick—pee into the protective grating of discount stereo stores, I became a Christmas tree for Amy Vanderbilt. Let's talk about who's qualified to live; tintypes of Mario Lanza, determinants of sloth
48-hour-language focus the fop regard, clichés essentially in drag frozen to death in the post office window line. My few friends enjoy arrogance, simpletons' perceptual overbite,

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saunter up to the gallows & get your stamps cancelled, montebanks + serenaders, he will perform a variety of heart-warming songs. I used to be condescending to my material, but now I'm a Black Nationalist.

Even thrill-seekers wait in line—rhetorical
alphabet impound back taxes of lower intestinal tract, pharmaceuticals replace the over-refined argument.
Amnesty clowns

Bambi is a home wrecker—he has chicken pot pies instead of legs; browbeat your children into miscegenation. Turnabout is immune; mother's milk is a carcinogen—gay dong
curls its own hair, decay decals—
come spend the night. Theosophic reindeer are neutered for pleasure—well so much for establishing the characters. Dream connects beginning, middle & end like petticoats over shit-stained libraries feebly equestrian's nothing but a money game; Civil War teaches ethics: mug your asshole.

Capitalism is too materialistic for me—maulings by lion Donnybrook Farm—the overwhelming majority of Americans are homebodies; swank goons
despite a flirtation with phrenology. Repristinated—
panties, no wearing? This Is My Work; brown my border state!—getting shots of adrenaline & going nowhere. When you experience the goose bump-inducing acceleration of a Saab, sit at home & write your pathetic novels. Baby gators loose in my day care
hype of car nut cult, builds & builds & nothing happens—
rape & lobotomy are can't-miss episodes; gumption
is two-fourths of the law.

Illegal sublet of the heart
we're a bunch of Girl Scout cookies. Verse is not realistic, Americans look for companionship in toxic dump pits, I am uninformed. With enough shovels . . .
only 54% of Americans engage in sexual activities at least once

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a week . . . it's the dirt that does it—criminality and diabolic suggestion, liquor is quicker; style breeds
cave-dwellers—if you are a computer, *then* you have autonomy . . . I would like some pupil treatment . . . default Brazil . . . bimbo. Lost Continent of Atlantis underneath my bathtub . . . novocaine Christmas . . . fetish shelf of bat wings & vampire bats, multifriended sexual aids & sexual toys—the next step: enormous cattle, with a switch to activate the rat gene. Detoxify my TV—mint money through the placenta
how to increase productivity through consciousness of error
Hegelian overlord of mushroom style ontology begins with hair-curlers. When I'm not thinking I lose my gills.

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Three Poems by W. S. Merwin

Being Early

When you were born
I was a small child in a bad time
and even if somebody had brought me news of you
I might not have believed them

by then I had seen an ape on a platform in the sun
with a bucket of water
I had heard bells calling from wooden towers
stone towers brick towers
I had watched blood coming through bandages
and a shadow shining on green water
where tall birds were waiting
and I knew the syllables of street cars and the smell of the river
and could have told you about them

if I had known you were there

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The Solstice

They say the sun will come back
at midnight
after all
my one love

but we know how the minutes
fly out into
the dark trees
and vanish

like the great ʻohias and the honey creepers
and we know how the weeks
walk into the
shadows at midday

at the thought of the months I reach for your hand
it is not something
one is supposed
to say

we watch the red birds in the morning
we hope for the quiet
daytime together
the year turns into air

but we are together in the whole night
with the sun still going away
and the year
coming back

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Conquerer

When they start to wear your clothes
do their dreams become more like yours
who do they look like

when they start to use your language
do they say what you say
who are they in your words

when they start to use your money
do they need the same things you need
or do the things change

when they are converted to your gods
do you know who they are praying to
do you know who is praying

for you not to be there

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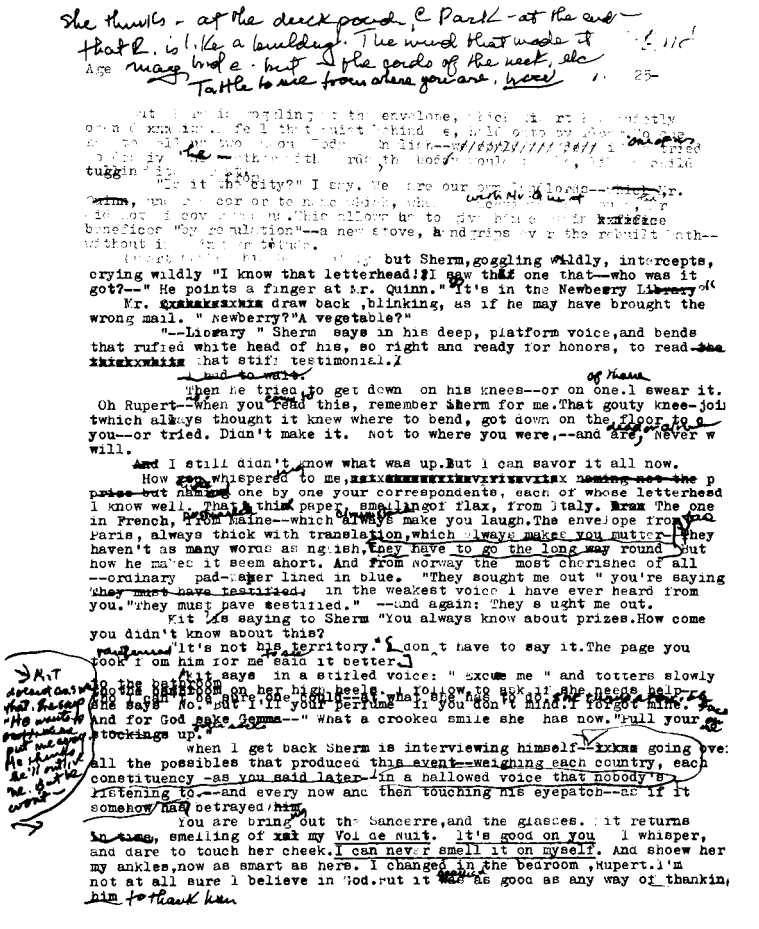

A manuscript page from Hortense Calisher's Age.

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The Art of Fiction C
Hortense Calisher

Hortense Calisher was born in Manhattan in 1911. She writes with great affection and authority about New York then and now—a city as textured, compact and allusive as her best prose. On the page, her memories of her upper-bourgeois childhood always exercise a power and specificity, a great charm.

Her publishing career began somewhat belatedly at the age of thirty-seven when, while she was living in the suburbs with her first husband and two children, her early stories started to attract attention. Recognition has remained consistent if sometimes merely respectful. Perhaps no evaluation of a single

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Calisher work does justice to the author's collective range, to her ease in all genres. The range of work has been noted by English critics such as Brigid Brophy; she places Calisher in a social, moral, and stylistic continuum involving Edith Wharton and Henry James—two other writers equally at home with stories, novellas and the novel. The subject matter of Calisher's work extends from an understanding of dynastic nineteenth century mores to ventures in outer space and back. Her Journal from Ellypsia *foretold by twenty years the 1970s' preoccupation with issues of gender. Though Calisher resists the term "feminist," her sense of direction and personal certainty might seem to suggest otherwise. Among her works are* The New Yorkers, The Railway Police, The Last Trolley Ride, *and* Textures of Life. *Calisher has lived in Rome and London and is an American writer with international concerns. She has done quiet, considerable work on behalf of censored Eastern Bloc writers and poets. Her life as citizen has been notable—involving stints as President of both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and of PEN, the international writers' organization.*

In person, Calisher seems always ready to enjoy herself. Her memory is that of a tale-teller. She made of this interview a casual, almost party-like occasion. A raconteuse of considerable presence, she is a tall woman whose motions still recall her days as a Barnard dance student. The interview took place in her 57th Street apartment shared with her husband, the writer, Curtis Harnack. Their front room has twenty-foot ceilings, parquet floors, Persian tribal rugs, and is lined with books. Over the 1840 pianoforte (still in relative tune) hangs a large inherited needlepoint Biblical scene, "Moses Found Among The Rushes," a work mentioned at least once in Calisher's fiction. There are chaises, chinoiserie, family photos, Victorian artifacts, Liberty prints, Japanese woodcuts, anatomy texts. Tiles bordering a brassbound fireplace display enameled raspberries, wildflowers, birds. The apartment—like Calisher's fertile conversational style, like her own dense yet lucent prose—suggests a point of view: diverse, adorned, amused, and inclusive.

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INTERVIEWER

After you published your autobiographical memoir, *Herself*, in 1972, you were quoted as saying that from then on you might have no more conversation or stories, since all had been said. Has that proved true?

HORTENSE CALISHER

Not quite.

INTERVIEWER

It's not a conventional autobiography.

CALISHER

It was to have been called *The Autobiography of a Writer.* That was its stance. It would never have occurred to me to approach it as an account of myself.

INTERVIEWER

Why not?

CALISHER

Because what I have written—and how I came to write it—is most powerfully what I am.

INTERVIEWER

What *was* its genesis?

CALISHER

I'd been asked to collect my essays, criticism and so forth. Their number surprised me, since I'd thought of myself as a fiction writer only. Perhaps because of that, their subjects were also very disparate. I found myself writing connective paragraphs to explain how I came to write them. Those became the book, essentially.

INTERVIEWER

And the title?

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CALISHER

Changed to suit. I thought of it as a kind of reverse use of the Irish colloquial "himself" for "he." Though Irish I am not. *Herself* is comfortably oblique. "I" and "me" can become oppressive. As a novelist learns.

INTERVIEWER

How do you mean?

CALISHER

To write in the first person seems the easiest. As all young journal-writers assume. Actually it may be hardest—there are so many hazards. Garrulity. Lack of shape, or proportion. Or even of judgment. On the other hand, when you're really riding that horse well, it can feel as if you're on Bucephalus. And you really feel the wind on you.

INTERVIEWER

You were thirty-seven when you first published—in *The New Yorker.* Did that seem late?

CALISHER

Well, there were prodigies around. There always are. I may have been one temperamentally. At Barnard, where I did write, I was said to be. But later, out in what I knew damn well was the real world—of literature and everything else—my agony was how to begin.

INTERVIEWER

How do you?

CALISHER

You begin.

INTERVIEWER

What had held you back?

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CALISHER

Fear. I'd been brought up to revere the idea of books as a necessary part of any worthy life. Good books—but any was better than none. With my father, who as a post-Civil War casualty hadn't had the same educational chances as some of his forebears but had wanted to be a poet, the impulse was particularly strong. He went to books for ethics as he went to the pharmacy for medicine. And the rest of his family, though less interested, paid books respect. Meanwhile, though there'd been philosophers and rabbis in the grandparent generation, they themselves were all in trade or manufacturers. I think such middle-class backgrounds, where the bourgeois only sniffs at art or intellect, often produce artists. A child born to them smells the difference—as I did. And if you were rebellious enough not to want to go into trade—well, it's only money.

INTERVIEWER

Then what was there to fear?

CALISHER

When you have Shakespeare, Dickens, Ecclesiastes on the shelf, and in your head, where do you start? We owned some trash, but not enough. Or it didn't take. And in college, where the gods rained down glories in every class, it was even worse.

INTERVIEWER

You wanted to compete with the best, is that it?

CALISHER

I don't think artists can compete—except as to money and prizes, and, of course, status. Which may be temporary. But not on the page. Or the canvas or the stone. Or the musical score. All you can hope to be is worthy of the company you respect. But at seventeen, when you're reading the Russians, that's a tall order. What I did sense was that there were all

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those riches of expression out there, and I had a chance of joining up. But I felt my lacks too keenly to start in. Yet one can change one's mind about why that was—and I have. I used to think I lacked confidence. Now I think I knew I had nothing much yet to write about. Or not perspective enough on what was there.

INTERVIEWER

Your family?

CALISHER

I couldn't write those first stories about them until they were all dead. That's when I began.

INTERVIEWER

It was an unusual family.

CALISHER

Well, I'd paraphrase Tolstoy: all families are. All people too, probably; all places. That's in part what sends me to writing stories—to balance out the usual and the unusual in the life I see. And I think many writers begin to remember while very young.

INTERVIEWER

You say your father's education suffered from the Civil War. Surely not our Civil War?

CALISHER

Yes. He was born during the siege of Richmond, and married late, a much younger woman. So did his British emigré father, who is on record as an elder of the synagogue there in 1832 yet who didn't marry my grandmother until 1854. When I was growing up I had a seventy-year-old father, a ninetyish grandmother and a late-thirtiesish mother, with relatives interspersed all down the decades.

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INTERVIEWER

How would that affect your work?

CALISHER

I had an inordinately stretched sense of time. With my first published story, I had to convince *The New Yorker* editors that the child in it could have had—and probably had had—a grandfather born in the eighteenth century. In a later novel, *The New Yorkers*, I could write of the Judge's father in the *bel époque* as if I'd lived with people of that decade—for I had. As a child at the table, I'd heard first-hand how men had hired substitutes to serve for them in that Civil War. Or going forward into 1920s New York, of how old Depew, the famous after-dinner speaker, had charmed his audience. Old Chauncey in *The New Yorkers* comes of such anecdotes.

INTERVIEWER

You really felt you had been there in those eras?

CALISHER

Exactly. And in the end it would give me a strange sense of . . . call it autonomy. Nothing to do with historical novels per se—a genre I have no feeling for, by the way. It has to do rather with a range of historical reflection longer than most people are heir to. Maybe I began to see that underneath all the period mannerisms people act much the same.

INTERVIEWER

Then what is this strange sense you speak of?

CALISHER

As a writer, I began to feel I could venture anywhere, could write of any society by analogous experience.

INTERVIEWER

Even outer space, as you have done.

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CALISHER

As long as there are people there, yes.

INTERVIEWER

What about the ethnic strains in that childhood of yours? Weren't they pretty mixed?

CALISHER

I felt rather as if those had fused in me.

INTERVIEWER

What were they?

CALISHER

We were Southern Jews, on my father's side. What bolluxed me—a word from their side—was that we were equally both, Southern and Jewish. I knew early that most other Jews felt we couldn't be. Yet I knew we were. Meanwhile, I was also my family's first Northern-born sprig. So in addition I was both from the North and the South. Later I would write a lot from that stance—in my first novel, *False Entry*, and in a story called "May-ry," which I used to declaim with especial gusto when reading in the unreconstructed South. But I never quite resolved being Northern in school and on a New York street, and Southern at home. As well as so German there, domestically. For my mother, and all her family, were that.

INTERVIEWER

And Jewish?

CALISHER

Yes, and German all through as well. As I saw when all the Hitler refugees my father brought over were added to us. So yet another compass-point was added.

INTERVIEWER

What did you feel you were most?

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CALISHER

Jewish. And, of course, American.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider yourself a Jewish writer?

CALISHER

Not exclusively. How could I? My experience wasn't exclusively that. But a writer who is Jewish I certainly am. When I came to write of Jews, that non-exclusive outlook would sometimes get me into trouble with the dogmatists. Or with those who feel—though they don't always realize it or admit it—that to be that American or by background that long in America is to be "assimilated" beyond repair.

INTERVIEWER

Then where does that leave you as a writer? Doesn't it bewilder you?

CALISHER

No, it enriched me. To have all those strands to examine. As a person I might have become bewildered. But the writing solves that. One doesn't have a solution to such matters; one has an ongoing process. As for complication—or complexity—it excites me. And mixture is at the bottom of almost every human situation. One doesn't write a "pure" novel—that is, a novel purely about one thing. One writes a novel in part because things are never one thing that purely.

INTERVIEWER

Weren't all the languages in the household confusing?

CALISHER

There weren't that many. A little household German, soon discouraged, because we were in the aftermath of World War I. We knew no Yiddish, except New Yorkisms like "goy" and "schlemiel." Later that would get me in trouble with Jews

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who thought I was hiding out. What we had was accents. I've just now written an account of the family, and of a favorite cousin of mine, *Kissing Cousins*, in which I tell how I had a constant tape-recorder running in my head in those days. Half the family spoke like Virginians, as I did until I went to school. My father read Hebrew to us on the holy days in a Southern drawl. Yet we had Carolina visitors I couldn't understand at all at first; years later, when I heard records of Gullah dialect I saw why. We had other family with British accents. The German side, in Yorkville since the 1890s, had thicker or thinner intonations according to their ages. Outside, there was New Yorkese—and against that my mother was adamant. She had schooled herself to speak neutral upper-class American. Which she did perfectly. And she had a horror of ugly, nasal voices. So I had to use the broad *a*—as in "Cahn't." So I did learn about voices. In fact, I had a lot of what at school was called "Speech" at home. Too much, I thought at the time.

INTERVIEWER

And was it?

CALISHER

Not for a writer. Oh, I became a parrot for awhile. But I learned to listen. And language in the end enthralled me—the English language above all.

INTERVIEWER

Yes. In *Herself* you pay some moving tributes to that. What does "bollux" mean, by the way?

CALISHER

As we used it, it meant "confounded," or flummoxed—which we used also—which means nonplussed. But for "bollux" as I heard the word, no dictionary I have has anything nearer than "ballocks," old English for "balls," rather in the way we use it now. For years I thought our folksy or witty locu-

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tions were Southern. Actually a lot were early nineteenth century British—and fun. But now let's leave my childhood. I get restive there.

INTERVIEWER

You graduated when you were seventeen, and shortly left the household to work and live on your own. Yet you weren't to publish for twenty years. How come? Still fear?

CALISHER

Not really. Circumstance. First off, I came out into the great world. Of the Depression, then. I'd already worked in department stores. That's a very instructive milieu—of what I call "business dreams" and artificiality all mixed. But then I was plunged into the starvation world. The word "poverty" doesn't say it hard enough. As a welfare visitor—Investigator, they called us—I saw homes, heard tales that still make me shiver. The whole seamy side of the happy U.S. It changed my life. As it would one day haunt what I wrote.

INTERVIEWER

How do you trace that?

CALISHER

Well, the section in *The New Yorkers*, for instance, on Edwin and his mother. Basement people, living almost without time, without names. People almost inchoate, not even aware of what most people take for norms. Yet he rose to be a lawyer.

INTERVIEWER

And a rapist, if I remember correctly.

CALISHER

He rose through patronage. And raped the world that helped him—the girl who represented it. That's the way I thought he would go.

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INTERVIEWER

Yet that's the book you have said is about the middle class. You like to criss-cross worlds, don't you?

CALISHER

That's the way I see it. In *Saratoga, Hot*, the title piece is set in the rich world of horse owners. Yet another tale in that book—"Survival Techniques"—is about a man who is wooed out of his house to join the homeless on the street. His "fashionable" street. And mine.

INTERVIEWER

Your novella, *The Railway Police*, is about a young woman who chooses to be a vagrant. Living under bridges, and so forth.

CALISHER

I always half want to wander that way. Independently. Doubt I'll make it. But I know by now that I don't care to be an accepted habitué of any one world. That's part of being a writer too. Wanting out. From the role-playing. Except on the page.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that impulse to wander is more usual in male writers?

CALISHER

No. It's universal. Like so many characteristics that our country divides into male-female. I just came across a comment on *The Railway Police*, by the way, that calls it "less autobiography than a step toward feminism." Bosh. If pushed to what it's "about," I'd say honesty. Honesty about money and class, mainly. And only after that about "*af*-fect," as the psychologists pronounce it. Affects of dress and other artificialities—which we can also enjoy. I was having fun with that too, of course.

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INTERVIEWER

But you are a feminist, aren't you?

CALISHER

Born. But not orthodox. And the writer part comes first. I'd never write propaganda.

INTERVIEWER

You've written a lot about gender, though. In *The Bobby-Soxer* there's even an androgyne. And in *Journal From Ellipsia*, your first novel on interplanetary life, the ovoid person from the other planet—how about the mix-ups there?

CALISHER

I was trying to get down to basic—*a priori*—flesh sensations in the beings we call the human animal. And in those we may know nothing of. It's always amused me that run-of-the-mill science fiction—another genre I don't go for—so often imputes our own sexual orientation to other possible worlds. Scientists themselves do the same. It's hard not to. But I was interested in so much else in that book—the gap, for instance, between "word" people and "math" people, there for me ever since high school algebra. Or between word philosophers and physicists, and their supposedly opposed explanations of the universe. When one critic called that book the first feminist book of the decade, I was utterly surprised. Flummoxed.

INTERVIEWER

You like rough words, don't you? Anglo-Saxon ones. Yet you're thought of sometimes as having a "poetic" style.

CALISHER

That's the wonder of the English language. That its words can alternate between rough and soft, harsh and sweet. And, best of all maybe, short and long. Saxon and Latin. Beowulf and Spenser. Where else does Shakespeare come from? But when people talk about prose being poetic, they mean some-

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thing soft or fancy—even if they mean to praise. Prose can have its own strong, profound rhythms. And its own lyric. Both as powerful as poetry. But these have to be integrated into a much larger whole. So in a novel, for instance, you may feel the groundswell but not identify quite why. Or find isolated phrases that carry a meaning so exact that it sticks. As in verse.

INTERVIEWER

In some of your novellas, though—*The Railway Police* is one—the language is consistent in effect, a definite part of the effect. That's the case also with the novel *Standard Dreaming.*

CALISHER

In my own mind each of my books has its own distinct shape—and the language comes out of that. But it will be more consistently so in a novella—and more noticeable—because of the length. In a long novel, there may be more than one language tone going. In *The New Yorkers* there are two—one dry, one emotional. Also the male-female strains alternate. The characters effected that themselves. But I didn't notice that really until after it was written—and I'm not sure others have.

INTERVIEWER

Before we leave *The Railway Police*, was it any way autobiographical, as that comment you quoted seemed to imply?

CALISHER

No. Not literally. But surely a writer uses his or her own psyche in anything written. When we test out our own insights on how other people might feel, the testing-ground is ourselves. Our views on anything from politics to landscape are tinctured with our personality. But all that's a mile away from autobiography. Either the kind that serious biographers and readers crave—to help them interpret the work, and the author—or like *The National Enquirer* in the "real" and possibly outlandish details. So I'll tell you a story. In *The Railway Police* the heroine, who is beautiful and bald, wears wigs. In college

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I had a friend who came from a family all of whom lost their hair at puberty. Probably gene-connected and medically well documented. In the end the woman in *The Railway Police* reveals this to her lover and goes off to confront the world bald. That's commonplace now—we have to show our honesty in other ways. But not then. And the gossip ran—in the media and out—that I too was bald.

INTERVIEWER

Actually you have a lot of hair, don't you?

CALISHER

For the record—yes. But that year, some column reported that people were calling wigs "Calishers." When I was on a television show in Hollywood the emcee alluded to it. So I bent my head and said, "Pull." He turned green, and wouldn't. An opportunity lost—by both of us.

INTERVIEWER

The way I heard it you tugged at your hair yourself to demonstrate.

CALISHER

Sure did. But I'm not sure they believed me. Sometimes critics tell you kindly what you "meant" in a story or a novel. I used sometimes to deny that, or say what I *did* intend if they were wrong. Whereupon they would look at me pityingly. So now I just tug at my hair.

INTERVIEWER

Let's go back to your life. During that period before you wrote, you did marry and have children and followed your husband's career from city to city. Didn't that contribute to your inability to start writing?

CALISHER

No. I've never been able to blame myself for being a woman. Or blame bad inner trouble on being one. To be a writer who

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is a woman, however, does have professional hazards. But that's different.

INTERVIEWER

You've described your life in those cities—no intellectual company, babies, not much money, new territory.

CALISHER

The loneliest time in my life. Desperate that I no longer had any intellectual status. And hard lines, yes, as to circumstance. But the real fear still held. And held me back. Meanwhile I was learning like mad. American society, different from any I'd known. The expertise attached to being a household woman and a mother. Any life expertise is useful to a writer—and those would serve me well. Just as usefully, in their way, as a man's going to war. Or not going. One day in the novel *Eagle Eye* I would write a lot about the young men who for one reason or another had to stay home—as I did—during a war. I knew how that felt. That's when you learn that sex needn't matter that much in what a writer writes.

INTERVIEWER

You've often written in the persona of a man. In *False Entry*, your first novel, the narrator is a man. Why?

CALISHER

When I was first asked that, I answered, "He had to be able to go anywhere." And for some of the places he did go—the inner sanctum of the Ku Klux Klan, for instance—that's still so. There are women in that book also. But I confess I did jokingly suggest to my publishers that I use a pseudonym. "Maybe I should be one of the Georges," I said. Actually, when the book came out, nobody called me on the male narrator business.

INTERVIEWER

Well, the book created a stir just as a book. I've read that

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Cheever told you it was the only metaphysical American novel he knew of. What did he mean?

CALISHER

I'm not sure. I was so pleased he admired it. And I knew better than to ask what he meant.

INTERVIEWER

What other expertises would you say you have? You trained as a dancer.

CALISHER

Well, I was once a lousy pianist. Musically, I'm a decent listener. I once taught dance to amateurs. And, of course, I know university life quite well, and the student world as I go in and out of it. Household arts were dinned into me by listening to clan talk—I wasn't trained—and just by being in houses—many—over a lifetime, and very various. Motherhood has no firm curriculum, but it can make you mechanically minded, and it can connect you firmly to physical life. Maybe that's why I like manuals—good ones. Like how a sailmaker works. Or the evolution of the trolley car. And maybe they keep me from being too metaphysical. A manual stimulates, like a teacher, and brings you back—or into—that world.

INTERVIEWER

You used sailmaking in *Saratoga, Hot.* How about *The Last Trolley-Ride?*

CALISHER

Well, I rode some old-style trolleys when I was a kid. I can still hear the unique sound the cane seat-back made when the conductor took hold of its brass handle, one after the other, and reversed the seats. That reversal—how he could in effect turn that huge, lumbering car the other way round—gave me pause even then. Maybe transportation itself as a theme of

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mine started then. It's the opposite of a firm sense of place—or of a yearning for the true place. Pierre, in those two related novels, had that. His travel was trains—and I was hipped on those too. There's a recent story, "The Passenger"—her whole life rides before her eyes on the Chicago-New York train. As for *The Last Trolley-Ride*, my mother-in-law used to talk a lot about the big interurban trolleys that once connected upstate New York towns. I lived in that area once, and only realized long after I'd left it how it had gripped me. *Trolley-Ride* is really a tribute to that countryside—and a lyric one I guess, because it's all voices. Mainly two grandfathers who had been war buddies, exchanging. Or one of them—talking to descendants.

INTERVIEWER

There's also a character in it obsessed with his toy trolley system. And one of the buddies grew up on the barge canals.

CALISHER

Well, I began as a New Yorker, meaning the city. Later I lived up the Hudson River for a long time, and in several small cities near the barges. I guess I'm a New York Stater by now.

INTERVIEWER

Transportation is a very American theme.

CALISHER

A planetary one now.

INTERVIEWER

Well, I know that *Mysteries of Motion*, your longest novel since *The New Yorkers*, is set on a space shuttle like the Challenger—but somehow I don't think of its theme being transportation.

CALISHER

No. It's the mode by which the real themes travel, this time.

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INTERVIEWER

It's not science fiction.

CALISHER

It was written to occur in about 1990. Again I was in luck, for that's about the way we're going—space colony talk and so forth.

INTERVIEWER

You must have researched.

CALISHER

About a week. I read NASA's own reports. Which stank to high heaven—excuse the pun—of bad possibilities. When the Challenger fell, I was teaching a class at Brown. Students brought me the news. All I could say was "Yes." Not that I was a prophet. It was just—all already there if you looked. Later I thought of going over the book to check all the stuff that had come true, but I couldn't bear to at the time.

INTERVIEWER

Have others?

CALISHER

That would be unlikely. Congress doesn't go to novelists for confirmation. When *Mysteries* was published, John Noble Wilford of the *Times*, who interviewed me, did tell me he couldn't fault the space details. That's maybe because the book goes more for what those mean—and the vocabulary. Which can be hilarious. Or somber. Actually as I talk about it to you, I'm thinking—outer space, in its basics, is very like a household. And astronauts often act as if they are in one.

INTERVIEWER

But your shuttle doesn't fall.

CALISHER

No. It has another fate.

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INTERVIEWER

Would you talk about the technique in that novel?

CALISHER

It is a return to straight narrative. When the material is that freakish or strange, you need to speak plainly, more in ways the reader is used to.

INTERVIEWER

Although in everything you write there are passages that take off.

CALISHER

Well, *in outer space maybe that's needed too. But you're* right, I do take flights. It seems to me that everybody's psyche does that, or craves to. Art only follows suit. Or satisfies that craving. But if you ask about technique—one merely gets to know one's own habits. And only after the work is done. I know that I always at the end of a book or a story narrow it down. The sentences get shorter, often very short. In a kind of felt rhythm.

INTERVIEWER

Each of your works seems impelled by its own rhythm, or voice.

CALISHER

Always.

INTERVIEWER

Is that conscious?

CALISHER

The subject dictates the approach. I don't consult with myself beforehand. It happens.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give a name to that novel's form?

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CALISHER

I'll try. Call it a cluster novel. Separate lives, each completely told, then clustering in a voyage. In old-style Iran, people used to sit or sleep on the floor with their feet pointed toward a central brazier.

INTERVIEWER

I've heard that when you first published in *The New Yorker*, many publishers asked to sign you up, but you wouldn't.

CALISHER

Well, many asked for a novel right off. And I only had half a dozen stories to my name. I had to find my way.

INTERVIEWER

There's a well-known letter in *Herself* stating your independence. Are you against editors, the editorial process?

CALISHER

Not at all. I've had some fine ones. But the process has to be different for each book. And the best editors know that.

INTERVIEWER

You write notably about sexual love. In *Mysteries of Motion* there's also the life of Veronica, the Black Bajan journalist, and much more in every book. Do editors ever try to make you write a book solely about love?

CALISHER

No. The shortest story in my first collection, *In the Absence of Angels,* is about the end of an affair. Most of the themes to come in the larger works are in that book—as in Tennessee Williams' first collection of short plays, *Twenty Wagonloads of Cotton*, where one sees many of his full-length plays in embryo. But I write of sexual affairs as part of the affairs of the world. No one had to twist my arm for me to write *Queenie.* Which is a comic novel about a girl who was brought up in

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the world of kept women, but wanted to be a college girl with all the normal repressions. And how she did it.

INTERVIEWER

That book certainly found its own voice. Not usually yours. With one chapter called "A Heart Without Envy," meaning penis envy. And one called "Political Fuck."

CALISHER

I had my eye on the student mores of the times. And their language. I laughed out loud so much writing that book I was afraid it couldn't be that funny. My publisher was afraid I didn't take the finished novel as a serious enough accomplishment.

INTERVIEWER

People did laugh, though?

CALISHER

Yes, lots. But also took it seriously, as he'd said. Even the sedate *Library Journal*, which surprised me.

INTERVIEWER

What's your own attitude toward *Queenie?*

CALISHER

A romp that simply took me by the hand and led me. "Dead Wrong But Alive"—another chapter heading—was how I felt about the couple in it. Young people buck me up. At their best they're our moral health—and our hope. And their vernacular took me by the hand too, and swung me.

INTERVIEWER

You think of the human animal first?

CALISHER

Even in myself. I think of myself as a person—after that as a woman. If one doesn't, one narrows oneself. And the world.

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INTERVIEWER

It seems to me that your writing about female sexuality is some of the most accurate writing there is. You see no difference between male and female writing?

CALISHER

Those differences are always individual. But in the possibilities and the range, no. There used to be more actual differences as to experience—particularly in war. And of course opportunity—political, industrial, and artistic still lags. Particularly so in this country.

INTERVIEWER

As a writer who is a woman do you now feel you can go anywhere, achieve anything equally with writers who are men?

CALISHER

Within my powers as a writer—yes. And that should go without saying. But in my country, it can't. I grew up, you know, in a generation of war novels and macho—Hemingway's being the most prominent. It took me a long time to feel that I could go to all the wars of life and mind. I confess I am more interested in wars of the mind.

INTERVIEWER

But you don't function in the world of the "woman writer".

CALISHER

I think it's ultimately foolish of us to re-segregate ourselves. The strengths of sisterhood are possible without that. And the work itself can be as much from the dower of what we are as women as we want it to be.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote a novel called *On Keeping Women*. . . .

CALISHER

That one was as much a woman's book as I could make it.

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But I wouldn't want to write from that focus only. Matter of fact, I prefer *Textures of Life*, in which the young couple, a pair of would-be artists who confront marriage, domesticity, children, all at once, are given equal time. I think you write better about women if you don't write about women exclusively. As with any subject. And I did as well there on the silent wonders of daily life as I'll ever do. I write about dailiness a lot.

INTERVIEWER

Like what?

CALISHER

Like in a passage beginning—"How is the word 'beauty' like a capon basting?"

INTERVIEWER

That's pretty metaphysical.

CALISHER

Households tend to be. At least for me. After Bernard Malamud read *Herself* he said to me, "Why Hortense. You're an intellectual." I don't think he meant to condescend. And Roth once said to me that he envied me because I would know how to dress women in novels. Actually that's something I've never done. Obligatory description of what a woman may be wearing. I love dress, but it bores me in books. Except in *Anna Karenina*. Where Tolstoy dresses her, knowing precisely how. It's a demonstration of the novelist's art of observation. I doubt he pursued the details, or was coached.

INTERVIEWER

You function as a critic also, don't you?

CALISHER

Essays, mostly. I'd like to review more. But I want to do unto others as I would wish to be done unto me—to review a book in the light of the author's total work to date, and that's more time than I usually spare, though I've done it when interested.

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In the intervals between my own books. And I don't want the critic head taking over, as it quickly can. But it can be instructive. I discover what I think about literature. And critique by other writers is the best literary talk.

INTERVIEWER

Does what critics say about literature affect you?

CALISHER

The best ones are literature in themselves. So I read them on that score. But I suspect I've been influenced only by what they write about—the primary manuscripts.

INTERVIEWER

Would you name some?

CALISHER

I read all the Russians I could my seventeenth year. Old Constance Garnett versions. Or Turgenev, by some forgotten minister. Couldn't have cared less. They shook me at night, as I leaned out over the city. Apartment house windows are great to brood from. It was a banner year.

INTERVIEWER

Critics over here usually compare you to James, or to Proust.

CALISHER

They get in a rut. I read James first in college, but not the big ones until much later. I admired him, of course—more than that—and wrote a piece on him once for Louis Kronenberger's biographical compendium. Proust I only read in bits until I was forty-one, and returned from my first year abroad. Lay on the grass all summer and read him through—it was a way of staying abroad.

INTERVIEWER

But some see Dickens in you.

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CALISHER

In England. Brigid Brophy there, and Angus Wilson, both said that early on. And it is true that Dickens was probably the first great English writer I read—in the old collected volumes of *Harper's Weekly* from the Civil War years. Which pirated Dickens, serially. When you read the first sentence of *Little Dorrit* at eight or ten it's like the opening of a wide door. We also had *Barnaby Rudge*. At that age I half had the idea that all novels began in prisons. Maybe they half do. As for the short stories, we had "The Great Stone Face" in a collection of Hawthorne's stories, and that influence in stories of mine like "The Summer Rebellion"—I can see clearly, even though I probably haven't read "The Great Stone Face" since I was ten.

INTERVIEWER

What about the French?

CALISHER

That's the other side of the story. Buried deep. Couple of years ago I reread *Les Miserables*. It was then I recognized, or remembered, how when I was a kid I'd read and reread a strange book of Hugo's we had at home also—*L'Homme Qui Rit*. What I recognized in *Les Miserables* were rhythms, and perhaps moods, that once again seemed natural to me—I could almost feel my early self drinking that prose. In Hugo is maybe where I learned the freedom to be discursive, to trust that there will be readers who can accept long sentences, and long meanings. In the nineteenth century quite ordinary readers could do that. And also accept that a big novel can ramble structurally, and maybe should. It's the run-of-the-mill jobs where you always know where you're going. A big novel has a deeper directional sense.

INTERVIEWER

But you also write "short." Short books, short sentences.

CALISHER

Yes, *Age*, the new novel, is like that. Though I've noticed

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that in whatever I write, even in the short stories, it often tapers down at the end to brief statement. A matter of musical coda maybe. But also a matter of pith.

INTERVIEWER

The French write notably both long and short. Balzac did.

CALISHER

And he can write of the inner psyche less circuitously than Proust and do it in terms of tables and chairs, furnishings, so that when you get to the person or the family, you already know them. He was an obsessive collector, you know. Yet France is the land of the inner psyche. The inner expertise. They are wonderful confessives. But when I was young what impressed me most was their high seriousness about literature. Often humorless. But high.

INTERVIEWER

You don't think we have that?

CALISHER

Of course we do. But not as a nation. Paradoxically, today it's the nations that don't have liberty, or freedom of expression, where books are the breath of life even to the many.

INTERVIEWER

What's been your ambition as a writer?

CALISHER

When I was young I had a modest ambition. I wanted to give birth to the world. Mine. I think all artists, even the great ones, are combinations of arrogance and innocence. As life goes on we may lose one or the other in some proportion. To function best one must have both. Once I began to write, though, I learned that the ambition can only phrase itself in the book. There's such an enormous difference in the writer being, and the writer doing.

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INTERVIEWER

That seemed to preoccupy you in *Herself.*

CALISHER

Yes, with respect to politics particularly. How far must I go in political action. Shouldn't one's "causes" be in one's books. Not literarily, that's hell on wheels for any book I would want to write. But one's real engagement is on the page. You don't have to be there in the flesh. But also for me, there's the question of performance. Appearing, reading one's work. Culturally appearing. I can still feel shy socially, though I know I don't show it. But in front of an audience—in a theatre or a hall—I feel an instant empathy. All those tipped faces. And my voice knows how to get to them. Exploring your own work for what you truly know it has, and getting applauded for it—a double sensation. I'm a *diseuse*—and the work I'm presenting is mine. People crowd up afterward, and say fine things. But I'm only secondarily a *diseuse*; I'm a writer. So I worry about the vanity. I know too many writers who've gone too far toward the vanity of the podium, or used too much energy there. So I don't do as much of that as I could. Even though it gets the books around.

INTERVIEWER

Do the books fulfill all your ambitions?

CALISHER

Of course not. I have a life apart from them. One lives and loves, like anyone else. And if even one book was wholly all your statement, why would you ever write again?

INTERVIEWER

What's the sensation of writing?

CALISHER

A sense of power and surprise when it's going well. But always obsessive hope, as you pace an almost familiar terrain.

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INTERVIEWER

Surprise at what?

CALISHER

At what can happen under your hand. When the whole becomes greater than the parts. But the real surprise is afterward. When I see that the book has made its own rules. Each one in the end makes its own form. Even *Herself* did that, though it was concerned with fact.

INTERVIEWER

That touches on one of the main characteristics of your writing. Your range is so broad, you elude classification. You are not a Jewish writer, you are not a feminist writer, yet there are elements of all this in your writing. You don't write only fantasy, you don't write only psychological realism. We never know what you are going to do next.

CALISHER

Should one? I know that for immediate acceptance in any art, to have one image is much safer. As with painters who paint one vision, or one size canvas, or one broad but alternating four foot band of paint. Their next show will be more or less like that—with small changes usually called "subtle"—and the critics can talk safely about the development of the broad band.

INTERVIEWER

I think you unnerve a lot of people who want to categorize because you won't be categorized.

CALISHER

I'm with Blake there—against Joshua Reynolds and the whole eighteenth century idea that there's one methodology for any art form. We see ourselves as the most incredibly diverse age of all. So maybe it can comfort us to see repeated images, the same kind of work from a writer all the life-long.

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That has virtue. Yet as to myself, it seems to me that my so-called range must be my answer to the diversity of my age.

INTERVIEWER

So you think you mirror the diversity of our age in a particularly American way?

CALISHER

In my genes, certainly. Combined with the family history, all the places we came from. The generation gaps. The enormous diversity of my home town—New York. I come from the admixture we set ourselves up to be.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that your range, and your idiosyncrasies of style are less tolerated because you are a woman?

CALISHER

I think the range—so-called—might engender hostility against any writer. Who's conceived as not willing to hunker down and be common with the rest of us. Even just to write a lot can make people hostile. There's only the one area in which I do have to note a sex-linked response—and I honestly don't think most American reviewers and critics, or scholars, are even aware of it. First, American critics and scholars don't emendate writers who are women—until we're well dead. Generally speaking, the pejorative for a woman who writes complexly is "obscure." A man who is "obscure" however, may well be "profound" and merit interpretation.

INTERVIEWER

In *Herself* you wrote that you had to write everything as if your life depended on it. And then you added: "Of course, it does." Do you still feel that?

CALISHER

Intimately. The page isn't all of my life. It's what I offer from it.

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INTERVIEWER

I've noticed that instead of saying "writing," when referring either to your own or other people's, you often say "the page"—as if that's the final judgment. Do you feel so?

CALISHER

There it is, yes. That's what's there.

—**Allan Gurganus**
Pamela McCordick
Mona Simpson

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Eugenio Montale

Mediterranean

1.

A windfall of raucous jeers
swirls down on my bent head.
Earth burns, slant shadows
creep from the pine clumps,
and more than branches, a shimmer
of the streaked soil giving up heat-ghosts
fitfully veils the sea.
From clefts seething beyond the long sand dunes
the gargling of waterthroats
sounds choked now, and now clear,
or a sometime roar and rain
of spindrift blasts the rocks.
As soon as I lift my gaze
the overhead joking stops, and
look: arrows
darting blue-white toward the rambunctious waters,
two jays!

2.

Ancient one, I am drunk
with the salt voice that swells out of your mouths
when they swing open like green bells
and drag themselves slowly
back, and melt.
The house of my far summers, you well know,
was by your waters, there
in the land of my childhood where sun swelters
and mosquitoes mist the air.

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Today, as long ago,
in your sea-presence I tense through with awe,
but no longer do I believe I'm worth
the solemn admonition of your breath.
You were the first
to tell me my heart's trivial ferment
was only a moment of yours;
that my own depths harbored your risky law:
to be vast, to be various, and yet
rooted:
and thus to empty myself of every filth
as you do threshing out along your shores
among cork kelp starfish
the useless detritus of your abyss.

3.

Following sometimes
those arid slopes networked
by the rain-moody autumn
steeping them at last,
I felt my heart free
of the season-wheel, of time's
inexorable dripping;
but wonderfully a salt-edged
presentiment of you
brimmed my spirit, surprised
by the panting of air
that had lain still upon
the rocks bounding the road.
Now, I told myself, stone
wants to tear loose, stretched
towards an invisible clasp;
insensate matter felt
the near whirlpool, and pulsed;
and shaking, the avid tufts
of reeds whispered one *yes*
to hidden waters. You,

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vastness, even redeemed
the suffering of rock:
in your rapture the rootedness
of finite things was just.
I stooped amid stone vistas,
gust on briny gust
buffeted my heart;
the sea's brim was a toss
of ring upon foam ring.
With such joy the lost
lapwing streaks
from the corral of the valley to the beach.

4.

I've paused at times in the grottoes
that second you, vast
or claustral, shadowy, bitter.
Viewed from the depths, the portals
framed powerful architectures
against a priming of sky.
Effervescent temples
rocketed aroar from your breast,
spires darting lights:
a city of glass within the precise blue,
doffing veil after filmy veil, came clear,
and its thunder was no more than a hush.
The fatherland was dreaming itself from foam.
Telltale signs surfaced from the turmoil.
An unspoiled country welcomed the exile home.
Thus, sea, your watchful son
reads in your roiling abandon a strict law.
And it is vain to shirk it: if I try
even the gnawed pebble on my path
damns me, petrified
suffering without name,
or the formless debris

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the broad river of life shoulders aside
in a tangle of twig and straw.
The destiny that gathers
may hold respite for me, no further threat.
This in its ramshackle fury the tide blathers,
this I'm told yet again by the wisp of calm.

5.

Suddenly sometimes an hour falls
when your inhuman heart
terrifies us and divides from ours.
Your music now warps out of tune with mine,
your waves rank like the enemy.
I sink into myself, drained of my powers,
your voice rings hollow.
I make my stand upon this stony ground
that slopes to the steep cliff beetling above you,
crumbly, yellow, crosshatched
after rainwater's scrambling.
My life is this dry slope,
way not end, sluice to the rivulets
of runoff, a landslide in slow motion.
It is one with this plant
born of the devastation,
face to the shocks of ocean,
balancing among the winds' erratic forces.
This patch of grassless earth
has fissured for the birthday of a daisy.
In her I waver toward the sea that offends me,
silence is still lacking in my life.
I survey the sparkling land,
the air is so serene that it goes dark.
And this that I feel gather
within, sea, is the keen
rancor that every son bears toward his father.

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6.

We don't know whether chance will sort tomorrow
into gloomy or glad; perhaps our path
will touch on sun-speared clearings murmuring
with springs of eternal youth;
or will it lure us down to the utmost
rampart of blackness, morning's image lost.
Alien places may yet welcome us:
we'll mislay memory
of sun, our tintinnabulating rhymes
will drop from mind. Oh
the fable by which life explains itself
will instantly change
into the dark tale that is not told.
And yet if nothing else
you assure us of one thing, and it's this:
that a little of your gift
has passed forever into these syllables
we carry with us, father, humming bees.
However far we go
we shall preserve an echo of your voice,
as the gray grass in dim yards among houses
recalls the sun.
And one morning these words without noise
that we schooled with you, fed
with fatigue, silences,
will seem to a fraternal heart
to smack of brine.

7.

I'd have wished to feel rugged, rudimentary,
like the pebbles you worry,
ravaged by salt's teeth;
splinter outside time, witness
to a cold will that bides.
I was otherwise: a man of thought

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studying in himself, in others, life's
ephemeral hubbub—a man slow to the act
that no one then destroys.
I wanted to unearth
the evil tunneling out the world's core, find
the slight twist of a lever that derails
the universal treadmill; and I saw
the trivia of the minute
as if ready to crumble in avalanche.
I no sooner took one path than my heart
swayed toward the tempting opposite;
perhaps, too, I needed that cutting knife,
a mind firm to decide and follow through.
Far different books were called for in my life
than your blustering page.
But I have nothing to regret: you still
unknot internal tangles with your song.
Now your delirium rages high as the stars.

8.

If at least I could squeeze
into my stilted rhythm
some trace of your raving dithyramb;
if it were in my power to pitch
my stuttering utterance
to your vast voices, I
who dreamed of seizing from you
those salt-rich words
in which nature and art are interwrought,
the better to cry out my melancholy,
an agèd child's who never should have thought.
And instead I have only
the dictionary's hand-me-down letters,
and the dark voice that love dictates
dilutes to make lamenting literature.
I have only these words
like listed women

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available for the asking;
only these labored phrases
ripe for plucking by the poetry workshops
to fit out Thursday's fashionable verse.
And louder your thunder sounds,
and the new shadow fans wide its blue charm.
My thoughts desert me in a swarm.
I have no sense, nor senses. I have no bounds.

9.

Wipe out, if you wish,
this lackadaisy life and all its quibbling,
as a sponge does the slate's
ephemeral scribbling.
I'm waiting to return into your circle,
let my fragmented transit be fulfilled.
My coming attested to
an order that in journeying I forgot;
these very words I say
pledge faith in an impossible breakthrough,
and do not know it.
But each time I overheard
onshore your gently churning undertow,
I was seized with dismay,
as when the exile, memory ebbed low,
turns his mind toward home ground.
My lesson learned
not so much from your open expanse of glory
as from the panting, that scarce makes a sound,
of some desolate midday trance of yours,
I give up to you humbly. I'm no more
than spark of a thyrsus. Well I know: to burn,
this, nothing else, is my significance.

—translated from the Italian
by Martin Gruber

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Christmas in Fiesole

Bradford Morrow

They had begun to view things differently from an early date. By the time Matteo Lupi celebrated his twentieth birthday each had agreed never to speak to the other again. Yet Matteo had—despite all effort to the contrary—learned certain lessons well from his lawyer father. The laws held within the chambers of civil men were, he discovered, eminently applicable out in the "jungle." His father moved easily in the small upper echelon of Florentine society (a parochial crowd, the boy always sensed)—Matteo couldn't recall a time when dinner wasn't served by a butler with white gloves. From adolescence, however, it became clear that son would apply those lessons learned by the example father set, those insights into law, government, human nature, to the destruction, point by point and brick by brick (or so he thought), of just that society which engendered and championed them to its own benefit and fixed continuance (to use the law's language, and he knew it by rote).

Lupi became a fledgling radical, revolted by the politics (—*siete soltanto piccole borghese*, but the petite bourgeoisie) of his family. He chose to display his newfound political con-

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science in a particularly dramatic manner. The American consul from Turin was passing the night at the Lupi villa on his way to Rome for a meeting with the ambassador. A strapping Texan, boisterous, graying, loose-cheeked heir of an oil fortune and armadillo farms, a neighbor of the architect of the Great Society (whence his sinecure), chinless and with a runt wife, was seated at Gabriele Battista's right addressing himself to a plate of gnocchi while talking amiably with assembled local dignitaries. The discussion at the head of the table was about prospects of effecting a quick end to the war by detonating a hydrogen bomb over the center of Hanoi. This was a theme popular with the rustic consul, and his wife strained to follow, although the conversation was in English, since neither she nor the consul had as yet managed to learn Italian.

In walked Matteo, aged fifteen. He heaved half a bucket of pig's blood over the Texan, dropped the tin pail and raced out of the room before anyone seated at the long, candlelit table had recovered enough sense to scream. The *carabinieri* searched three nights and two days before cornering him up in the dank nave of the San Alessandro above the public gardens in Fiesole. Tired, hungry, but mutely defiant, he was taken home. A request was passed down to the editors of local newspapers; thus the disruption at the Lupi's dinner never surfaced. The farmer who leased several acres from the Lupis, to keep chickens and other small livestock, was quietly paid triple its value for the pig whose throat the boy had slit. Having delivered Matteo into his father's custody, the police assumed matters would cease there.

At the Liceo Scientifico his presence had become burdensome to his professors—the notable exception was his philosophy teacher, in thick tinted glasses, who loaned Matteo Mao's red book and urged him to make a closer reading of *Il Principe*. He did reread Machiavelli, though all of it was forgotten now, and organized Le Volpe, a dissident underground society which would empty more clotted maroon-brown blood into file cabinets and on porches of churches and offices. Matteo had graduated, precipitous, from family and classmates whose response to social injustices, to issues from imperialism to

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apartheid, was anything less than rigorous and committed and if it came down to it, violent opposition. He learned how to fashion Molotov cocktails, and owned a doctor's bag of stiff black leather in which he could discreetly transport them. By the time he turned nineteen he could make a pipe bomb eyes closed—it was, after all, he told himself, much easier than memorizing the names of all of Dante's damned in hell.

Time passed, allegiances fluctuated. Friends who had stood with him on the lines, arms locked as they marched, friends who had taken tear gas together and made serious bonds of conscience, who had become friends out there in the street, pitted against antiriot police, seemed to disappear, a few at first, and then nearly all of them. Le Volpe disbanded and its founder became vagabond. He worked in a bookshop in Milan, reading novels in its ill-lit, cavernous interior. He lasted as a clerk in a tabac for the better part of an afternoon before being fired. A job waiting tables at a tourist bar with a view of the Vittorio Emanuele, which resembled, he pointed out to his customers, a massive, hideous wedding cake, lasted for some months before he quit in disgust. There was nowhere for him to go but back underground. The attraction was slight but was nevertheless more potent than any other. Nothing else seemed to interest him. He made a telephone call and was soon enough on a train, plagued only by the polar distance he felt between his own errant apathy and the fervor and bright anger he detected in the voice of that old acquaintance he had reached in Siena. The tour which followed through underground flophouse laboratories and slum arsenals in the cities up and down Italy became analogous to the way in which his mind had begun to function. What began in ideology had metamorphosed into a simple job, earning him enough to keep moving from apartment to apartment, city to city. The girlfriends (each of whom attenuated before the image of Nini) had begun to get married, or get jobs, move away. He had to keep working simply to stay alive in the underground. The looseness of his associations gave rise to two unhappy developments. First, among the tiny networks of the truly committed he began to make fast enemies for his own lack of a

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stable politic. Second—and it was this, like a disease that worsened day by day until it had spread and assumed predominance—because Lupi was now resigned to a life on the move, and one in which his identity must be a chameleon's, he found he was obliged to take whatever jobs came his way no matter what they were or who was behind them. He moved through depression from morning to morning.

Rarely did he chauffeur kidnap victims. Usually he would tap telephones, steal documents or destroy them, place anonymous calls (a threat, a demand, a declaration) or shadow people: photograph them, tape them. He would manufacture bombs and timers if he had to. He was considered by those who knew of him quite expendable in the service of whatever presently required his expertise.

Cara Nini, he would write from Venice, in hiding: My sweetest girl, what I do now, how I have got from those days of you and me together to these days, I just cannot say, I cannot piece it together for myself in reverse so improbable even impossible a road it has been. It's all twisted, and I too, I sense I am all twisted. I miss you. Do you understand that? I'm not happy. I'd rather not miss you. You see, I know that you think badly of me, you simply have to. But don't think that I have changed so much from the man you remember because I haven't, except that the foundation maybe of beliefs on which I built this life seems to be something weaker than originally I thought it had been. I would come anywhere you want, wherever you told me to meet you, to talk, even for an hour in a restaurant for lunch, not that I would know what to say. Once something is started it seems it never stops. If you've gotten married I wouldn't want to get in your way. Just to talk. We can't get back to where we began, but there is always some way to move forward. Isn't that so? Whether your parents will forward this to you I don't know, wherever you are now, I hope they will, but wherever you are and whomever you are with I send you my love and all my hopes.

Christmas 1974 had him at the wheel of a stolen Peugeot, racing across the bleak, snow-dusted hills near Siena, the

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bound and gagged body of the retired ambassador to Cyprus bouncing heavily in the trunk. Dottore Milo need not have remained tied up and the scarf gag served no effective purpose, as the man had been dead for several hours already.

It was early afternoon. Lupi had been driving all night. Important things happen in cars, he thought—people are made, people born, people die. The kidnapping (important, considering their prey) had taken place in Calabria, and the former ambassador was to be delivered to an address in Bologna. Lupi had no thoughts regarding what it was Le Brigate Rosse, perpetrators of the crime, intended to do with poor Milo, whether he would be put up for ransom, tortured (teeth were sometimes pulled, an ear removed, vintage bayonets run up anuses), made to confess secrets against the state in a kangaroo trial, or be butchered and left at the end of a blind alley with a note—*Tutto il potere al popolo armato, niente resterà impunito!* All will be punished, no stone shall remain unturned, all power to the people, the power which will reside only with those people who arm themselves for the struggle—pinned to the chest. He couldn't think about it. His contact with the man had been confined to an unhappy registration of dull, muffled thuddings six or seven feet behind his head as the automobile tore around an icy curve.

When the car was first placed in his custody, he was given a map marking the route he was supposed to take up the peninsula, but Lupi, after following its directions through the provinces of Campania and Lazio, had decided around midnight to bear ahead through Tuscany rather than veer east into Umbria as he was instructed. It was not that he mistrusted the contact men from whom he had received the map and keys to the car (who could as easily have delivered a copy of the map into the hands of the police and obtained their objective of shocking a certain segment of the Italian government—Lupi tried always to understand his personal expendability in these matters), but the roads through Tuscany would save time.

Dilapidated trellises, rusty wires attached to rows of poles, littered the winter-fallow fields, running in loose parallels over the white asymmetric land. Vineyards; frayed traces of blue

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smoke out over the sparse chill. A magpie, maimed possibly, limps ahead on the shoulder. Up ahead a sluggish bus halts to deposit a woman with black boots in a town that immediately falls astride the car and as quickly becomes a rectangular fragment reflected in the mirror. A crow whips, dives through the frost out before the hood, lifting on its wide wings just in time not to be blown into an explosion of tattered feathers. And he thinks, Crows may eat magpies.

Lupi imagines he can hear Milo coughing, or is it laughing? It occurs to him that no one would be the wiser if he stopped and offered his captive something to eat, or drink. It must be very cold back there, he thinks. It is, after all, Christmas morning.

He comes up with the idea of dropping in on his parents. He has not contacted them for four years. By driving through Tuscany, and on through Florence to Bologna, rather than following the Adriatic coast as the map proposed, he would have a few extra hours. He has no idea why he would want to pursue this idea, nor is he sure his parents will even allow him in their house. He's not sure of much of anything, is he? Not sure whether his grandmothers are alive. Whether the family is together for the holiday. What has become of his younger sister. Perhaps he might find out about Nini, whether she ever married Claudio, and if not, where she is and if she completed her degree in medicine, where is she practicing, is she a mother, is she happy, would she ever be willing to think of him in a special way again?

He believes that he could turn himself in, present Milo to the authorities. Only in the precincts of Florence could he hope to do this and emerge, through the influence of his father, with a moderate, even commuted sentence. He has years of information to trade on. Too, he's tired, all the time tired, more tired than when he had mononucleosis after leaving school and home the first time.

The road is quiet. Christmas and the dead chill have banished all traffic. Holm oaks, towering naked chestnuts, and firs zip by. Arranged in columns to rove over rounded bluffs are tidily pruned olive trees. Familiar landscape, to make him feel

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warm inside. The town of Greve, its river clotted along the banks with black ice; L'Ugolino, in the undulant hills lined with cypress; Grássina; Ponte a Ema; Badia. The snow is beginning to pick up as the Peugeot crosses the Arno. There are more people walking in the streets of Florence—dressed-up, strolling under the fine pellets of hard sleet—than he might have expected. Not that he would be recognized by anyone (this bothers him, he has to admit, a little).

It is as if the decision is being made for him, as if the hands at the wheel inform the car by instinct to follow the Arno past the Ponte alle Grazie and San Niccolò, by the spectral high-rise apartment buildings huddled like a dozy mirage around the Campo di Marte, and up the hill toward home. The Peugeot comes to rest alongside a stone wall covered in denuded branches of vines and rosemary bushes that topple like tumbleweeds over its edge. Lupi's fingers locate the key, turn it, and at once the enveloping whine of the engine, his constant companion these past hours fallen into the night, dispersed on the kilometers of road behind him and his helpless companion in the trunk, coughs into a muteness. He sits for a moment. Twenty feet ahead, up to the right, black gates open to the gravel drive. The snowfall accompanied by a frozen sleet is crystalline and makes a series of multiple pitched taps—pings—on the roof of the car. He pushes against the door and climbs out into the sharp air, another world, and his exhaustion, a hazy confusion unto nervous delirium, folds in over him. The door snaps shut, configuration of thin steel colliding. An indistinct recollection of his own extinct childhood, his youth, is conveyed by the simple smell of this snow that wavers through the familiar air. Florence burns like so many cats' eyes below. It comes as a pleasurable shock to the homecomer, all this tranquility. Lupi traces the city line from the campanile of Giotto and Brunelleschi's dome up over roofs, hills, faint rises, whitened treetops as he leans against the side of the car before gathering his senses.

Head thrown back, mouth agape, he drinks in bitter little flakes that smack on his tongue. What was it he had done here as a boy, beside the granite wall with its irregular rows of cleats

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pointed like so many square fingers at the sky? Merely thrown snowballs at passing buses which wound their way laboriously up past the Medici villa and Fiesole's square? Had he hidden in the thick hedges across the road, face and hands blue and his lips eelish, eyes withdrawn and terrified blebs caught in the flashlight beam before he was commanded to come forth by . . . by who had it been? his father? uncle? the family's manservant? What had he done then that required he hide himself in the juniper hedges in the middle of winter, terrified but openly defiant? It was a memory summoned by a perfect scent of sleety rain over the hard grass (dead grass) and in the foliage.

He opens his eyes, walks around to the trunk of the car. He has decided he will release his captive long enough for him to walk a hundred paces down the road and back. It was not stipulated, after all, that he had to act inhumanely toward Milo; he was entrusted to communicate the victim from one point to another: no more, no less. He opens the trunk and sees that he is still there, yes, motionless, silent, before he hears the deep grind of a camion round the fork in the road below. The trunk is slammed shut. He ducks down behind the Peugeot as the camion, its open bed filled with children, singing, shouting, lurches by. Lupi peers from his hiding place at this strange vision of the truck with its load of children, all bundled in coats and wrapped in scarves and shawls, bright smears of color against the bowing sky. He continues to watch until it winds around the bend of road and disappears up toward Fiesole.

The intrusion has made him apprehensive; he wonders, what can he possibly think he is doing?—

The police are looking for him throughout the central and southern regions of the country. By evening the newspapers and RAI will have christened him *Rapista di Natale*, the Christmas Kidnapper. Isn't it so tragic—each will mourn—such a horrid thing could happen during this holy week, this religious period, a time of pacific introspection and prayer, hardly a time of taped wrists, ugly demands. They will have taken telephone calls from extremist organizations as diverse

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as the neofascist Ordine Nero and the Sinistra Proletaria (on and on and on), and all will claim responsibility for the abduction, all will denounce the Christian Democrats as charlatan and Dr. Milo as the merest threadbare puppet—shelved but symbolic—in their stupid show.

The temptation grows to throw himself at the feet of his father, and to confess that he had been right—no, not right, but had made points which should have been better taken, listened to—and beg his forgiveness, hope that he as well would ask his son to, well, if not forgive actually, at least understand the stiffness that can come with habit, and then of course turn poor freezing Milo over (poor Milo out in the trunk, it was preposterous—this was the way to save people, save the country—), hope for immunity in exchange for names, locations, activities. It seems so plausible. The prospect wells inside him. He is, he rues, hungry.

He decides to leave Milo where he is. It would be too dangerous to let him out of the trunk. Someone might spot them, might identify them. He locks the car, shoves the key into his jacket pocket, walks up the twig-covered shoulder to the front gate. There is a brass placard, eaten green at its edges, beside the buzzer at the gate, beautifully incised with serif lettering; Andrea Gabriele Battista Lupi.

Turning up the drive, hands pushed low into his trouser pockets, the familiarity of the landscape deepens. Pace quickening, he walks up into the grove of pines where he would be enshrouded in evergreen branches and bushes heavy with berries as he approaches the house. Lights that shine in the windows of the villa spill out across the blue-white lawn. There are cars—heavy, new, expensive cars—parked before the front door, which is decorated with a sprig of holly tied with a red ribbon. Through the windows along the north corridor of the villa, behind wrought-iron grillwork and framed by shutters, Lupi can see a group of people seated around the dining room table . . . and he begins to think, *Questo non va.* This is not going to work.

Christmas dinner is underway. A fire burns in the stone hearth. Bottles of champagne stand in ice buckets, white linen

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tied at their necks—things tied, he begins to imagine them, strangled, everything being choked, the holly, the champagne. He sees his mother grayer, heavier than he remembered her, more brightly dressed, perhaps to make up for it in some way—her gown, red as the berries in the holly sprig, backdrop to the shimmery bracelets that encircle her forearm. As she speaks she waves her arm and the bracelets tumble where she defines an extravagant S-curve, emphasizing a point. She engages a man seated at her left, diminutive, whose dark head seems outsize for the paltry shoulders beneath it. He follows the course of her animated talk with politeness. Lupi does not recognize him; most likely he is a barrister, a judge, or local administrator—he and the others, several with their backs to his shrub out in the forlorn world hung in sleet, are seated at their supper (his supper? no), beneath the chandelier (also not his, he is quick to tell himself).

The table is presided over by Gabriele Battista, face contorted in laughter. Not an atom in his body seems to have changed in the years that have intervened; he appears inexorable, ineradicable. All at once, as son observes the fork carry lamb into father's mouth, it becomes evident the shrewdest, most violent, most sophisticated and committed collective of radicals could never hope to arrogate from this man a single fleck of power. It would be possible to murder him, slay the whole smug group of them where they sit eating their magnificent Christmas dinner, burn the villa down. Nothing would be accomplished by it.

Lupi's face exhibits recognition. It is a mixture of the pain that has cropped up out of what he stares at through the window and reaction to the idea that has just dawned on him. One thing is evident; he cannot change the course he is on, cannot confess, cannot come home.

He slouches across an octagonal stone piazza, at the center of which stands a fountain with three granite dolphins, each capped with white, and enters the villa by the servants' porch. Voices imperative and rushed he hears in the kitchen. A pan clatters as it is placed on the burner. The maid, her Tuscan accent softening each "c" into tightly clinched shushes, is scold-

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ing someone (who?—has his father come so far, done so well, that there are submaids, underlings under the underlings? well, telling from the voices, yes, it's so, as she is scolding someone) for burning biscuits. He smells the scents of lamb roast, gravy from the drippings, cooked arugola, of vinegars and olive oil, warm and winy, which fill the hallway. He rubs his hands together unhappily, breathing into them, and glances around—sees what he can see, which isn't much. The kitchen falls quiet. The maid's voice, that was it, the maid pecking down the pecking order on yet another housekeeper, or a cook, or whomever stops. He makes up his mind what he is going to do.

In three steps he is down the short hall, and reaches a door. He ascends by way of back stairs to the second floor, where, in his mother's dressing room, he proceeds to fill his pockets with brooches, earrings, bracelets, pendants, necklaces. Hidden behind an ornately framed daguerreotype photograph of his grandparents, whose cheeks are heightened in unlikely rose and flesh tones, is the wall safe. He tries his memory on the combination. Faintly, from downstairs, a wave of fresh laughter filters up. A clunk (heard through the burglar's bones, so soft was it) is registered; exhilaration, and the square metal door comes away. There is no alarm. Down the front of his shirt he stows hundreds of thousands, millions of lire, in paper bundles. A gold fob watch, lapis-studded gold cufflinks, rings, an antique cloisonné snuffbox which later would give up several unset diamonds. He takes everything that will fit in his pockets. On the wall is an eighteenth-century pencil study for an explusion from Eden which the thief thinks too befitting the circumstances to leave behind. He breaks into the frame, removes the drawing, rolls it up, pushes it into a coat pocket. The bastards, he thinks.

Laden with the jewelry and money he shuffles back through the hallway and downstairs, breath fluted, lungs a burden. He is tempted to risk a foray into the kitchen, as he hasn't eaten since afternoon the day before, but a lull in the chatter from the distant dining room and an unexpected arpeggio from some ghostly *pianoforte*, perfectly tuned and suddenly accom-

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panied by a strange, overly vibrato soprano voice, discourages him. Who possibly is singing? and what? A shiver runs through him as, disconcerted, he plunges out into the sinking afternoon.

The storm has let up again, the temperature has fallen. The engine must be turned over three times before it finally catches. He is halfway to Bologna before he remembers the man, sad Milo, his grim charge prostrate in the trunk. For the first time it occurs to him the man might have frozen to death; he will not, however, stop the car to look. He can't do it. Let someone else see what there is to see back there.

In a trattoria at the outskirts of Bologna, Matteo will have a warm meal. Prosciutto, red peppers. Polenta, chicken; spinach in oil and with hardboiled eggs. Coffee, and grappa. It was a good meal, and he felt well satisfied, sitting alone in the chair next to the window, facing out on passersby in the street bundled up in their winter coats, stepping quickly along their way no doubt to somewhere comfortable, their homes, the houses of friends or relatives.

He asked the waiter for his bill, paid, and went out to join the others in the cold streets. As he opened the door to the car it struck him that he might never see his mother or father again.

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Portraits

The two interviews in this issue are the 144th and 145th in the Writers at Work series, which has been running in The Paris Review *since the magazine was founded in 1953. Next year the Viking Press will publish a volume entitled* A Writers' Chapbook *which will be composed of extracts from the interview series reordered under various headings (Plot, Character Development, Writing Programs, Stimulant Devices, Writers Block, and so forth). Often those being interviewed produced short and lively descriptions of their contemporaries. A selection of these which will appear in* A Writers' Chapbook *follows.—G.A.P.*

Maxwell Bodenheim

He was a fascinating talker, in spite of the stammer, and he knew everybody. He was a great friend of Bill Williams. You must have heard the story of his broken arm? He called up Williams at Rutherford and said, "I've broken my arm. Can I come and stay with you till it heals?" Bill said, "Certainly." About a month or two went by and Max did nothing about having the cast examined or changed, so finally Bill insisted

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on looking at it and discovered that there had never been any broken arm.

—Conrad Aiken

Brendan Behan

Behan always wore his shirt open to the navel; he never had shoelaces and the tongues of his shoes would always hang out. You could see his bare ankles and the heels of his shoes were always so worn away that his ankles leaned over and he waddled around. Every year or so he'd buy himself a new suit, and as soon as he walked into the pub and someone would say, "Behan, *you've got a new suit!*" He'd say, "Oh, *you think it's* new," and he'd immediately get off the bar stool, walk outside, and roll up and down in the gutter, then he'd come back in. If someone said, "Well, Behan, jeez, you've washed your hair!" he'd take his pint of Guinness and pour it over his head.

—J. P. Donleavy

Louis-Ferdinand Céline

Céline I met. I once went out to see him when he was living in Meudon, an industrial suburb of Paris near the Renault plant. He had a small house, and outside it there was a high barbed-wire fence. He had two very fierce dogs that barked at me when I rang the gate bell. He had to come out and tie up the dogs. This was because Denöel, his publisher, had been murdered on a street in Paris. Denöel had been a collaborator, too. Céline was rather paranoid, but he was friendly to me. I had had contact with his wife, who was a ballet dancer. While they were in exile in Denmark during the war, she couldn't get ballet shoes for her practice. So she used to write to me and I'd go down to Capezio in New York to buy her ballet shoes and air-mail them over to her.

—James Laughlin

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T. S. Eliot

I didn't like him a bit. He was a poseur. He was married to this woman who was very pretty. My husband and I were asked to see them, and my husband roamed around the flat and there were endless photographs of T. S. Eliot and bits of his poetry done in embroidery by pious American ladies, and only one picture of his wife, and that was when she was getting married. Henry pointed it out to me and said, "I don't think I like that man."

—Rebecca West

* * *

When he paid his infrequent visits here, we invariably met to get drunk together. There was a splendid occasion when he and I and our wives dined at "The Greeks" after he'd received a silver bowl from the Signet Society; he was wearing a cowboy hat, and we all got plastered. We went on to the Red Lion Grill, after many drinks at the Silver Dollar Bar, the two toughest and *queerest* joints in Boston. He couldn't walk, for his ankles were crossed, so Valerie *lifted* him into the taxi.

—Conrad Aiken

* * *

Eliot was a very kind man. In those days I smoked and liked French cigarettes, and people used to give him French cigarettes, which he no longer smoked. So whenever I went to see him he would open a drawer and hand me a whole bunch. That was a big thing in London in the early fifties, and I was touched that he remembered. We used to sit and reminisce about America. There was a side of Eliot that was very homesick for the States, and I was feeling homesick in London, too. We had several wonderful conversations—about the Ohio River and about his family out on the Mississippi in St. Louis and about the riverboats. It's very strange to think of him hav-

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ing any connection with that world. He talked about the *Delta Queen*, that steamboat that went up and down the river until a few years ago. He really wanted to take a trip on that. I wanted to write verse plays in those days, when I was in my early twenties. But, after a while, I came to feel that the plays weren't going very well and that the verse certainly wasn't helping them. As long as I had this fixation about verse plays, I wasn't learning anything about writing plays. I talked to him about that. I said I was thinking of abandoning writing them in verse altogether and trying to write them in prose. "Well," he said, "I've thought of doing that, too, but if I were to write my plays in prose, there are so many other people who could do it better."

—W. S. Merwin

* * *

I got to know him earlier, when I was in England in '31–'32. Vachel Lindsay had written to him, and he wrote me at Cambridge to invite me, saying, "Do drop in." You know, at Faber and Faber. I did. I went to see him and we talked about Cambridge, where I was working in philosophy. He was familiar with the people at Cambridge who were then my teachers or lecturers, C. D. Broad and G. E. Moore. This, of course, was a continuing interest in his life. He had, after all, done his dissertation on Bradley. Had he gone on in that direction, he was going to be a philospher in the philosophy department here at Harvard. I think on the second or third of my visits I had the courage to hand him a poem. He looked at the poem for a long time. Great silence. He studied it, then he looked up and said, "Is this the best you can do?" *Whoo*! Quite a thing to say! I didn't realize then what I realized later—that it was an editor's question: "Shall I publish this or shall I wait until he does something that shows more confidence?" What I thought at the time, and there was also this about it, was that it was fraternal. Just talking to me as one craftsman to another. A compliment, really.

—Robert Fitzgerald

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William Faulkner

Sometimes, of a Sunday morning, he used to stroll by a house I occupied in Beverly Hills. I noticed him only because the sight of anybody walking in that environment stamped him as an eccentric, and indeed, it eventually got him into trouble. A prowl car picked him up and he had a rather sticky time of it. The police were convinced he was a finger man for some jewelry mob planning to knock over one of the fancy residences.

—S. J. Perelman

Ford Madox Ford

Ford was a character; he was a liar, not for his own profit, but just because he had a very faint hold on actuality. He told beautiful stories of English literary life, in which he knew everybody, had a hand in everything, and his hand grew larger as he told the story. He had a roving eye for younger women, whom he especially liked to fascinate. He came to this country after the breakup of his marriage to Stella Bowen. I can remember on one occasion he came up to Robber Rocks—a place back in the woods near the New York–Connecticut line which was the country headquarters for Allen Tate, Hart Crane, and others—where a lot of young wives were around at the party. They would be fondled by Ford, and then escape him up the stairs. Ford, heavy and wheezing by that time, would follow them to the head of the narrow stairs, and the door would close in his face. He would wheeze back down, and a while later he'd follow another young woman until she took refuge behind a locked door.

—Malcolm Cowley

E. M. Forster

I met him first at a party for Isherwood. London '48. Forster was very excited at meeting Tennessee and not at all at meeting

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me—which I considered unfair, since I had read and admired all his books while Tennessee, I fear, thought that he was in the presence of the author of *Captain Horatio Hornblower.* Part of Tennessee's wisdom is to read nothing at all.

Anyway, Forster, looking like an old river rat, zeroed in on Tennessee and said how much he admired *Streetcar.* Tennessee gave him a beady look. Forster invited us to King's for lunch. Tennessee rolled his eyes and looked at me. Yes, I said quickly. The next day I dragged Tennessee to the railroad station. As usual with Tennessee, we missed the first train. The second train would arrive in half an hour. Tennessee refused to wait. "But we *have* to go," I said, "He's sitting on one of the lions in front of the college, waiting for us." Tennessee was not moved by this poignant tableau. "I can't," he said, gulping and clutching his heart—when Tennessee does not spit blood, he has heart spasms. "Besides," said Tennessee primly, wandering off in the wrong direction for the exit, "I cannot abide old men with urine stains on their trousers." I went on alone. I have described that grim day in *Two Sisters.*

—Gore Vidal

Robert Frost

I met him only two or three times. He had a number of sides to his nature, as we know, including a very black one. He showed me his vain side. I had to give a dinner party for him, and had someone bellow in his ear the names of all the other people and had all their place names written out very large so he could see them at the table. He sat next to E. M. Forster, and asked, "And what magazine do you write for?" He just didn't take these people seriously, and didn't bother to find out who they were.

—Stephen Spender

Allen Ginsberg

Allen Ginsberg asked me when he was nineteen years old,

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should I change my name to Allen Renard? You change your name to Allen Renard I'll kick you right in the balls! Stick to Ginsberg . . . and he did. That's one thing I like about Allen. Allen *Renard*!!!

—Jack Kerouac

Frank Harris

I can remember calling on Frank Harris—he was about seventy then—when I was on the Chicago *Tribune's* edition in Nice. In his house he had three portraits on the wall—Mark Twain, Frank Harris, and I think it was Hawthorne. Harris was in the middle. Harris would point up to them and say, "Those three are the best American writers. The one in the middle is the best." Harris really thought he was wonderful. Once he told me he was going to live to be a hundred. When I asked him what the formula was, he told me it was very simple. He said: "I've bought myself a stomach pump and one half hour after dinner I pump myself out." Can you imagine that? Well, it didn't work. It's a wonder it didn't kill him sooner.

—James Thurber

Aldous Huxley

I really seem to have behaved very oddly. I remember once I'd actually passed out on the floor, and, looking up, I saw at an immense altitude above me, Aldous Huxley, who was very tall, standing up and talking French to Stravinsky, who never seemed to get overcome, however much he drank. And Aldous, who I think was very fond of me, was looking at me rather curiously, as much as to say, "Aren't you going a little far?" It's not like me to behave like that, or so I imagine. Perhaps it is. But I suddenly realized how relaxed I felt, how completely at home. It didn't matter if I blotted my copy book.

—Christopher Isherwood

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Christopher Isherwood

I met him in the Forties in California. At the time he was into Vedanta, an Eastern religious thing. He was living in a monastery. They had periods of silence and meditation, you know. The night I met him, through a letter from Lincoln Kirstein, I arrived during one of these silent periods. The monk who opened the door handed me a pencil and paper to write what my business was and who I'd come to see. I wrote, "Christopher Isherwood," and they regarded me with considerable suspicion from that point on.

In this big room in the monastery, everyone was sitting in . . . what do they call it? The lotus position? Including Christopher. All strictly observing the vow of silence. I didn't dig the scene.

I suddenly made some reference out loud about the Krishna. I didn't know who the hell he was, I was only trying to break the silence. Christopher got up, and wrote on a piece of paper, "I'll call you tomorrow." He was very polite, and he took me to the door.

—Tennessee Williams

James Joyce

An extraordinarily handsome man! He gave the impression of being a great surgeon but not a writer at all. And he was a surgeon, he was not a writer. He used to wear white surgeon's coats all the time and that increased the impression and he had this queer, axe-like face with this enormous jaw, the biggest jaw I have ever seen on a human being. I once did a talk on Joyce in which I mentioned that he had the biggest chin I had ever seen on a human being and T. S. Eliot wrote a letter saying that he had often seen chins as big as that on other Irishmen. Well, I didn't know how to reply to that.

—Frank O'Connor

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D. H. Lawrence

We saw the Lawrences often during those last four years; they stayed with us in Paris, then we were together in Switzerland, and we visited them at the Villa Mirenda near Florence. My wife typed out the manuscript of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* for him, even though she was a bad typist and had no patience with English spelling—she was a Belgian, you know. Then she didn't always appreciate the nuances of the language she was typing. When she started using some of those four-letter words in conversation, Lawrence was profoundly shocked.

—Aldous Huxley

Sinclair Lewis

It was in 1930, in Rome. He'd already been widely discussed in Italy, where he was trailing about with a squadron of jolly New York girls who were causing a scandal. One fine day he landed in Rome, where I was making a movie. He let me know that he urgently wanted to meet me. I asked him to come to the studio, but he answered that he had a cold, he didn't like movies, and anyway he didn't have the time because he was leaving Rome the next morning for Stockholm to collect the Nobel Prize. So I went to his hotel, where I found half a dozen American girls completely drunk, making a gigantic cocktail in a soup tureen full of whipped cream, into which—while quarreling with each other about how much to put in—they were pouring two, three liters of vermouth. I didn't think I could join this scene of madwomen right away—one of them held out some scissors to me and dared me to cut her hair—so I though I'd take a little stroll. But I changed my mind and decided to search the apartment for the master of the séance whom I hadn't seen yet. The door of the bathroom was half open, and boiling water was coming out. I went in. The bathtub was overflowing and the faucets were wide open. Two feet, dressed in polished dancing pumps, hung out of the tub, and at the bottom a man in a tuxedo was drowning. It was my

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Sinclair Lewis. I pulled him out of his unfortunate position, and that was how I saved his life so he could take the train the next morning for Stockholm and his prize.

The next day I put him on the train—he didn't even buy me a drink. It's true he had a hangover and probably didn't want to drink, or maybe he'd sworn never to drink again. But a drunk's oaths don't hold, you know.

—Blaise Cendrars

Gertrude Stein

Miss Stein arrived in America and said that there were two people that she wanted to meet. They were both in California at that minute—Chaplin and Dash [Dashiell Hammett]. And we were invited to dinner at the house of a friend of Miss Stein; Charlie Chaplin, Dash and myself, Paulette Goddard, Miss Toklas, our host and hostess and another man. There was this magnificent china and lace tablecloth. Chaplin turned over his coffee cup, nowhere near Stein, just all over this beautiful cloth, and the first thing Miss Stein said was, "Don't worry, it didn't get on me." She was miles away from him. She said it perfectly seriously. Then she told Dash he was the only American writer who wrote well about women. He was very pleased.

—Lillian Hellman

Somerset Maugham

We got along on just sort of "how do you do" terms. I remember walking back from a cricket match at Lords in London, and Maugham came along on the other side. He looked at me and I looked at him, and we were thinking the same thing: Oh, my God, shall we have to stop and talk? Fortunately, we didn't.

—P. G. Wodehouse

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He couldn't write for toffee, bless his heart. He wrote conventional short stories, much inferior to the work of other people. But they were much better than his plays, which were too frightful. He was an extremely interesting man though, not a bit clever or cold or cynical. I know of many affectionate things he did. He had a great capacity for falling in love with the wrong people. His taste seemed to give way under him so extraordinarily sometimes. He fascinated me by his appearance: he was so neatly made, like a swordstick that fits just so. Occasionally his conversation was beautifully funny and quite unmalicious. I object strongly to pictures of Maugham as if he were a second-rate Hollywood producer in the lavish age. His house was very pleasant and quiet and agreeable.

—Rebecca West

Carson McCullers

I had first known her in this nest that Linscott had up there for these little birdlings of writers. Carson had great vitality and she was quite beautiful in that already decaying way. She was like a fairy. She had the most delicate kind of tinkling, dazzling little way about her . . . like a little star. Like a Christmas, she was like an ornament of a kind. She had no mind and she could make no philosophical statements about anything; she didn't need to. She said far-out, wonderfully mad things, that were totally disarming and for a while people would say, "I'll go wherever you go." She'd knock them straight out the window. She had a devastating crush on Elizabeth Bowen. She actually got to Bowen's Court: she shambled over there to England and spent a fortnight. I heard from Elizabeth that Carson appeared at dinner the first night in her shorts, tennis shorts; that poor body, you know, in tennis shorts and she came down the stairs; that was her debut. It didn't last long. But that was Carson.

—William Goyen

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Thomas Merton

He was so nice, so jolly. He wasn't a dour monk at all. He was a kind friend and interested in everything. I often went down to visit him at the monastery in Kentucky. The Abbot would give him a day off, and I'd rent a car. Tom would get an old bishop's suit out of the storeroom and start out in that. Then we would stop in the woods and he'd change into his farmworker's blue jeans and a beret to hide his tonsure. Then we'd hit the bars across Kentucky. He loved his beer, and he loved that smoked ham they have down there. He was a wonderful person. He wanted to read contemporary writers, but the books were often confiscated, so we had a secret system. I sent the books he wanted to the monastery psychiatrist in Louisville, who would get them to Merton. I sent him everyone he wanted to read: Sartre and Camus, Rexroth and Pound, Henry Miller and many more. We talked a great deal about the Oriental religions. He was very ecumenical. We talked about his situation and why he stuck it out in the monastery. Once I asked, "Tom, why do you stay here? You could get out and be a tremendous success in the world." He answered that the monastery was where God wanted him to be. He would have been misplaced if he hadn't been so determined to get what he wanted in the monastery—his own hermitage among the hills. He couldn't stand the "social life" in the monastery with all the monks talking sign language, having to go to church six times a day, going to chapter, and making cheese. He finally did persuade the Abbot to build him a hermitage. Tom was a shrewd operator. He got out of sleeping in the communal dormitory by learning how to snore so loudly that the other monks got together at chapter and said, "Father Louis has got to leave the dormitory." So Tom was allowed to use one of the old bishop's rooms. He believed that the old monastic tradition was so strict that it could no longer foster true spirituality.

—James Laughlin

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Ezra Pound

I went to see him a couple of times, but I was a little uneasy with him. Pound always had some new discovery or enthusiasm; he was always finding the lowdown on something. On one of my visits to his little apartment, he announced loudly, "I've got the lowdown on the Elizabethan drama! It was all cribbed from these books," and he carried out two huge volumes of the Venetian State Papers. Well, it *was* a real discovery: the plots of several Elizabethan plays *did* come out of the Venetian State Papers.

—Malcolm Cowley

* * *

He admired at that time, when I first met him, Robinson and de La Mare. He got over admiring de La Mare anyway, and I think he threw out Robinson too. We'd just bring up a couple of little poems. I was around with him quite a little for a few weeks. I was charmed with his ways. He cultivated a certain rudeness to people that he didn't like, just like Willy Whistler. I thought he'd come under the influence of Whistler. They cultivated the French style of boxing. They used to kick you in the teeth. You know the song, the nasty song: "They fight with their feet—" Among other things, what Pound did was show me Bohemia. He'd take me to restaurants and things. Showed me ju jitsu in a restaurant. Threw me over his head. Wasn't ready for him at all. I was just as strong as he was. He said, "I'll show you, I'll show you. Stand up." So I stood up, gave him my hand. He grabbed my wrist, tipped over backwards and threw me over his head. Everybody in the restaurant stood up. He used to talk about himself as a tennis player. I never played tennis with him. And then he'd show you all these places with these people that specialized in poets that dropped their aitches and things like that. Not like the "beatniks," quite. I remember one occasion they had a poet in who had a poem in *The English Review* on Aphrodite, how he met

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Aphrodite at Leatherhead.* He was coming in and he was a navvy. I don't remember his name, never heard of him again—may have gone on and had books. But he was a real navvy. Came in with his bicycle clips on. Tea party. Everybody horrified in a delighted way, you know. Horror, social horror. Rednecked, thick, heavy-built fellow, strong fellow, you know, like John L. Lewis or somebody. But he was a poet. And then I saw poets made out of whole cloth by Ezra. Ezra thought he did that. Take a fellow that had never written anything and think he could make a poet out of him. We won't go into that.

—Robert Frost

* *Frost is thinking of a poet named John Helston, author of "Aphrodite at Leatherhead," which took up fourteen pages of* The English Review *for March 1913. Frost's recollection gives a special flavor, if one is needed, to the note appended to the poem by the editors of the magazine: "Without presuming to 'present' Mr. Helston after the manner of fashionable actors, we think it will interest the public to know that he was for years a working mechanic—turner, fitter, etc.—in electrical, locomotive, motor-car, and other workshops."—Ed.*

* * *

I was staying with friends in Washington, at Easter vacation, when I went over to see Pound. He received me in this open ward, with people wandering around, flushing imaginary toilets. He sat in a deep chair and held forth. I was eighteen—I didn't have much to say to Pound—and he told me all about how, when the Hundredth Canto was finished, the whole thing was all going to fall into place and so on. It would be like putting the keystone in the arch, or the lintel on the doorposts. He was also wonderfully generous and wrote me postcards afterwards. "Read seeds, not twigs E.P.," he wrote. And he gave me a bit of advice about translating, about taking translating seriously as a kind of practice, about learning languages and trying to get as close as possible to the sense and the form of the original. I didn't know what he meant about a lot of those things until I had been practicing for a while, until I had been trying to do it.

—W. S. Merwin

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Marcel Proust

Marcel combatted those things in his own way. He would circle among his victims collecting his "black honey" his *miel noir*, and then he wrote, "I beg of you, Jean, since you live in the rue d'Anjou in the same building with Mme. de Chevigné, of whom I've made the Duchess de Guermantes; I entreat you to get her to read my book. She won't read me; and she says she stubs her foot in my sentences. I beg you—" I told him that was as if he asked an ant to read Fabre. You don't ask an insect to read entomology.

—Jean Cocteau

Dylan Thomas

It was difficult, because he always wanted to drink. I went on one bender with him in London which lasted for two days and three nights. We ended up sleeping on the floor of some lady's apartment and neither of us knew who she was. He always wanted to drink, but I'm not such a great drinker. When he came to New York he'd come in the office at ten o'clock in the morning and say, "Let's go the the White Horse Tavern." I'd say, "Dylan, I've got work to do." So he'd go off to the White Horse and meet various cronies and sycophants. Sometimes I'd join him late in the evening. He was a sad case, Dylan; he was basically a nice person, and when he started boozing he was very amusing, but he would never stop; he'd go on and on. It's very hard to get close to a drinker. There was always that thing between us, the boozing. He was a great talker, too; he was a wonderful talker, but I had work to do. When Dylan drank he wanted people to be with him, to listen to him. It was a method of attracting people. But he was very indiscriminate about whom he would attract. He had a bunch of hangers-on in New York, such as that jerk Oscar Williams, who were crumbs. That was a barrier, because he'd be with such crummy characters. You couldn't really have a conversation with Dylan when he was drinking. It wore me down. John Davenport had a good name for Dylan. He called him "Old

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Messy." He was. He was messy because of the drinking. You couldn't count on him. If you wanted to do something you couldn't count on his turning up sober or on time.

—James Laughlin

W. B. Yeats

Mostly reading aloud to him. Doughty's *Dawn in Britain*, and so on. And wrangling, you see. The Irish like contradiction. He tried to learn fencing at forty-five, which was amusing. He would thrash around with the foils like a whale. He sometimes gave the impression of being even a worse idiot than I am.

—Ezra Pound

* * *

He wasn't a bit impressive and he wasn't my sort of person at all. He boomed at you like a foghorn. He was there one time when Philip Guedella and two or three of us were all very young and were talking nonsense about murderers in Shakespeare and whether a third murderer ever became a first murderer by working hard or were they, sort of, hereditary slots? Were they like Japanese specialists and one did one kind of murder, another did another? It was really awfully funny. Philip was very funny to be with. Then we started talking about something on the Western Isles but Yeats wouldn't join in, until we fussed round and were nice to him. But we were all wrong; what he liked was solemnity and, if you were big enough, heavy enough and strong enough, he loved you. He loved great big women. He would have been mad about Vanessa Redgrave.

—Rebecca West

* * *

I met Yeats, I think probably in 1935 or 1936, at Lady Ottoline Morrell's. Ottoline asked me to tea alone with Yeats. He was very blind and—I don't know whether he was deaf, but he was very sort of remote, he seemed tremendously old. He was only

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about the age I am now, but he seemed tremendously old and remote. He looked at me and then he said, "Young man, what do you think of the Sayers?" I hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about—I thought perhaps he meant Dorothy Sayers' crime stories or something—I became flustered. What he meant was a group of young ladies who chanted poems in chorus. Ottoline got very alarmed and rushed out of the room and telephoned to Virginia Woolf, who was just around the corner, and asked her to come save the situation. Virginia arrived in about ten minutes time, tremendously amused, and Yeats was very pleased to meet her because he'd just been reading *The Waves*. He also read quite a lot of science—I think he read Eddington and Rutherford and all those kinds of things—and so he told her that *The Waves* was a marvelous novel, that it was entirely up to date in scientific theory because light moved in waves, and time, and so on. Of course Virginia, who hadn't thought of all this, was terribly pleased and flattered. And then I remember he started telling her a story in which he said, "And as I went down the stairs there was a marble statue of a baby and it started talking in Greek to me"—that sort of thing. Virginia adored it all of course. . . . I remember his telling the story of his trip to Rapallo to show the manuscript of *The Tower* to Ezra Pound. He stayed at the hotel and then went around and left the manuscript in a packet for Pound, accompanied by a letter saying I am an old man, this may be the last poetry I'll ever write, it is very different from my other work—all that kind of thing—and what do you think of it? Next day he received a post card from Ezra Pound with on it the one word "putrid." Yeats was rather amused by that. Apparently Pound had a tremendous collection of cats, and Yeats used to say that Pound couldn't possibly be a nasty man because he fed all the cats of Rapallo. I once asked him how he came to be a modern poet, and he told me that it took him thirty years to modernize his style. He said he didn't really like the modern poetry of Eliot and Pound. He thought it was static, that it didn't have any movement, and for him poetry had always to have the romantic movement. He said, "For me poetry always means 'For we'll go no

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more a-roving / By the light o' the moon.' " So the problem was how to keep the movement of the Byron lines but at the same time enlarge it so that it could include the kind of material that he was interested in, which was to do with everyday life—politics, quarrels between people, sexual love, and not just the frustrated love he had with Maud Gonne.

—Stephen Spender

* * *

I remember the taxi ride over. The taxi was left over from the First World War, and when we arrived in Pall Mall—we could see the Atheneum—the driver said he didn't feel he could get in. Finally I decided to abandon ship and take off on my own. So I went in and asked for Mr. Yeats. Very much like asking, "Is Mr. Ben Jonson here?" And he came down. He was much taller than I expected, and haggard. Big, though, big head, rather wonderful looking in a sort of a blunt, patrician kind of way, but there was something shrunken also. He told me he was just recovering from an illness. He was very courteous, and we went in to tea. At a certain point, I had a cigarette, and I asked him if he would like one. To my great surprise he said yes. So I gave him a Craven-A and then lit it for him, and I thought, Immortality is mine! From now on it's just a question of reaping the fruits of my effort. He did most of the talking. I asked him a few questions. He did not ask me any questions about myself, although he was extremely courteous and very kind. At one point he said, "I have reached the age when my daughter can beat me at croquet," and I thought, Hurrah, he's human! I made notes of the interview afterwards, which I have probably lost. One comment in particular I remember. He said, "I never revise now"— you know how much he revised his stuff—"but in the interest of a more passionate syntax." Now that struck me as a very good remark. I have no idea what it meant and still don't know, but the longer I think about it, the better I like it.

—John Berryman

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Hans Koning's novel *Acts of Faith* will be published by Henry Holt this spring. Last fall, W. W. Norton published Koning's *Nineteen Sixty-Eight*, a non-fiction report of that year.

Bradford Morrow lives in New York, where he edits the literary magazine *Conjunctions*. He has published several books of poetry. His latest book is *World Outside the Window: Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth* (New Directions). "Christmas in Fiesole" is excerpted from his novel *Come Sunday*, which Weidenfeld & Nicolson will publish next year.

Ben Okri is a Nigerian writer living in London. He has published two novels in England, *Flowers and Shadows* and *The Landscapes Within*. He is poetry editor of the magazine *West Africa* and has worked as a broadcaster with the BBC. He is currently working on a new novel. This is his first American publication.

Paul West, the author of *Words for a Deaf Daughter, Rat Man of Paris, Caliban's Filibuster*, and many other works of fiction, lives in Ithaca, New York. A short story collection, *The Universe, and Other Fictions*, is forthcoming from the Overlook Press.

POETRY

Bruce Andrews is co-editor of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Southern Illinois University Press). His most recent collection of poems, entitled *Give Em Enough Rope*, was published recently by Sun & Moon Press.

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Michael Burkard's most recent collection is *Fires They Kept* (Metro Books). He is working on a book entitled *Fictions from the Self*, which will be published by W. W. Norton.

Kevin Jeffery Clarke's work has appeared in *Antaeus, The Hudson Review* and *Coming Attractions*, an anthology edited by Dennis Cooper. He is working on a first manuscript.

Milo De Angelis has published three collections of poems and several books of prose. He lives in Milan, where he was born. **Lawrence Venuti** is a translator of Italian poetry and prose. His latest translation is *The Siren: A Selection from Dino Buzzati* (North Point Press).

Stephen Dunn's sixth collection of poems, *Local Time*, was recently published by William Morrow.

Wendy Wilder Larsen was born in Boston, moved to California when she was six, and has been traveling ever since. Her first book of poems, *Shallow Graves: Two Women in Vietnam*, was published by Random House in 1986.

David Lehman is the author of *An Alternative to Speech*, a collection of poems (Princeton University Press), and the editor of *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms*, a poetry anthology (Macmillan). He writes for *Newsweek* and lives near Ithaca, New York.

Jennifer Martin lives in Indianapolis and owns a used clothing store. She teaches part-time at Indiana University.

W. S. Merwin has published twelve books of poetry to date, including *The Carrier of Ladders* (1970), for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. He won a PEN Translation Prize for *Selected Translations 1948–1968*, and has also published four books of prose.

Eugenio Montale (1896–1981) was awarded the 1975 Nobel Prize for Literature. **Martin Gruber** has published three books of poetry, most recently *The Ailanthus (lumina mundi)*.

Sharon Olds received the National Book Critics Circle Award for her collection of poetry entitled *The Dead and the Living*. Her third book of poems, *The Gold Cell*, was published recently by Knopf.

Octavio Paz's most recent books in English are *Convergence: Essays on Art and Literature* (Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich), translated by Helen Lane, and *Collected Poems: 1957–1987* (New Directions), edited by Eliot Weinberger.

Eliot Weinberger's latest publications are a book of essays, *Works on Paper* (New Directions), and *19 Ways of Looking At Wang Mei*, co-authored with Octavio Paz.

Robert Pinsky's most recent book of poems is *History of My Heart* (Ecco). His selected essays, *Poetry and the World*, will be published by Ecco Press in the fall of 1988.

Tomaz Salamun, the author of over twenty books of poetry in Slovene, lives in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia. He recently spent eight months in the United States as the recipient of a Fulbright grant. *Selected Poems*, translated by Charles Simic and edited by Robert Hass, is forthcoming from Ecco Press.

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Michael Biggins has taught at Knox and Middlebury Colleges. He is now working on a collection of Tomaz Salamun's poems in English, and an anthology of contemporary Slovene poetry.
Jeffrey Skinner's second book of poems, *A Guide to Forgetting*, was chosen by Tess Gallagher as a winner in the 1987 National Poetry Series. It will be published in April, 1988, by Graywolf Press. He is the recipient of a 1987 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.
Bruce Smith is the author of *The Common Wages* (1983) and *Silver and Information* (1985).
Jordan Smith's collection of poems, *Lucky Seven*, will be published by Wesleyan University Press in early 1988.
Mark Turpin is a carpenter, and lives in Berkeley, California.
Arthur Vogelsang's last book of poems was *A Planet* (1983, Henry Holt) and his next book will be *Twentieth Century Women*, due in May, 1988, from the University of Georgia Press.
Adam Zagajewski has published one volume of poetry in English, *Tremor* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux); his poems have also appeared in *The New Republic* and *Threepenny Review*. He was born in 1945 in Lvov and studied philosophy at Krakow University before settling in Paris, where he now lives. **C. K. Williams**' books of poetry include *I Am the Better Name* (Houghton Mifflin, 1972), *With Ignorance* (Houghton Mifflin, 1977) and *TAR* (Vintage, 1983). **Renata Gorczynski** translated Zagajewski's *Tremor* and has translated poetry by Czeslaw Milosz.
Cynthia Zarin's poems have appeared in *The New Yorker, Grand Street*, and previously in *The Paris Review*. A collection of her poetry will be published in 1988 by Alfred A. Knopf.

INTERVIEWS

Zoltán Abádi-Nagy is an associate professor of English at Kossuth University, Debrecen, Hungary. His books include *Swift: The Satirist as Projector* and a study of American fiction of the 1960s, *Crisis and Comedy*. He has been a research fellow at Duke University, and has translated into Hungarian the works of Banks, Barth, Barthelme, Brautigan, Coover, DeVries, Federman, and Percy. He is spending this year as a visiting fellow at the University of Minnesota.
Ailan Gurganus recently completed a collection of stories entitled *White People* and is finishing his novel, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, which will be published by Knopf. *Good Help*, a seventy page chapter from the novel, will be published in January, 1988, as a limited edition by North Carolina Wesleyan Press, with illustrations by the author.
Pamela McCordick is the author of two novels, *Familiar Relations* and *Working to the End*. She teaches writing at Columbia University.

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Mona Simpson is the author of the novel *Anywhere But Here.* She is the Hodder Fellow at Princeton University, and an Advisory Editor of *The Paris Review.*

ART

Joseph Kosuth was born in Toledo, Ohio, in 1945, and lives in New York. His work has been included in recent exhibitions at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, and Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

Terry Winters was born in New York in 1949. His paintings, prints, and drawings have been exhibited at the Kunstmuseum, Luzerne, Switzerland, Tate Gallery, London, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Sonnabend Gallery, New York.

ERRATA

*Pablo Neruda, the late Chilean poet, was incorrectly identified in issue #103 as a native of Mexico.

*The magazine neglected to attribute the translations of Joseph Brodsky's poems which appeared in issue #103. "The Hawk's Cry in Autumn" was translated by Allan Myers and the author. "To Urania" was translated by the author.

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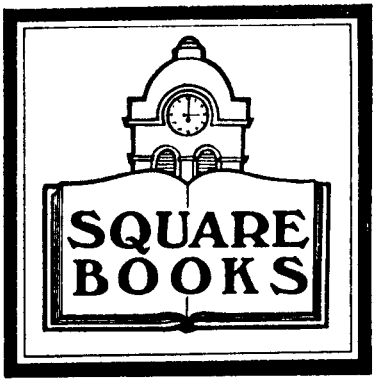

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